

International

Islamists' grip on power at stake in lacklustre Morocco election

People 'still skeptical'; 64% of Moroccans plan to abstain

RABAT: Moroccans go to the polls tomorrow for parliamentary and local elections that will determine the fate of the Islamist party that has ruled since the Arab Spring uprisings. First elected in 2011, the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) hopes to win a third term this year, having clung on to power at the head of coalitions for the whole intervening decade.

But there are few clear battle lines between the PJD's coalition partners and the opposition, and big decisions on key policy areas like agriculture, energy and industry remain in the hands of King Mohammed VI. Opinion polls are banned in Morocco near election time, but a survey in February by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis showed around 64 percent of people planned to abstain. Political science professor Ahmed Bouz highlighted "voters' feeling that elected officials have little leeway to make decisions".

People are still skeptical of whether elections make a difference to how the country is governed, even after a 2011 constitutional reform, he added. Morocco adopted the new constitution after decades of skirmishes over the separation of powers and the king's role in the day-to-day running of the country. Drawn up in reaction to the February 20th Movement, the local version of the Arab Spring uprisings around the Middle East and North Africa, the document moved the country closer to a system of constitutional monarchy without giving up the king's central role.

King on top

Regardless of who holds elected office, major decisions come from the palace, including during

the coronavirus crisis. The extent of the crown's powers has led some local media to mock the PJD's attempts to take credit for the successes of their latest term. Mohammed VI has already announced a plan for a "new model of development" with a "new generation of reforms and projects" in the coming years.

All parties are expected to sign up, regardless of who wins the election. The plan's major aims include reducing the country's wealth gap and doubling per-capita economic output by 2035. "The major directions are set and the elections only serve to produce the political elites capable of implementing them," said political scientist Mohamed Chiker.

During the election campaign, most parties have ignored issues of individual liberties, in particular the call by some activists to decriminalize sex out of wedlock, a divisive subject in Morocco. "It's disappointing but not surprising that politicians are ignoring our appeal," said Sonia Terrab of the "Hors la loi" ("Outlaws") collective. For now, three major movements dominate the political scene: the PJD, the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM).

'Widening the distance'

In the run-up to the vote, allegations of irregular campaign spending rather than policy debates have dominated headlines. "Monstrous amounts of money have been spread around to try and foil the people's will," senior PJD official Abdelaziz Aftati said Saturday, without naming the alleged culprits.

PAM has been more direct, accusing the RNI -



RABAT: Supporters of the Progress and Socialism party (PPS) gather during a campaign rally in Sale near Rabat, few days ahead of the parliamentary elections. —AFP

led by billionaire businessman and agriculture minister Aziz Akhannouch - of "flooding the political scene with money". RNI, a junior member of the current coalition, said it "rejected categorically" the allegations. Mud-slinging aside, and with little to differentiate the parties, the election is "widening the distance between voters and the institutions", political scientist Mustapha Seimi said. Even an electoral turnout of 45 percent "would be a nice surprise" after just 43 percent in 2016, he added.

Changes to the voting system mean that

Moroccans will vote in both parliamentary and local elections on the same day for the first time, in an effort to boost turnout. The electorate of almost 18 million are to vote for 395 deputies and more than 31,000 local and regional representatives. Meanwhile, parties' shares of seats will be calculated based on registered voters, rather than those who actually cast their ballots, in an amendment seen as favoring smaller parties. On the same vote share as in 2016, the new system would leave the PJD with around 80 seats, rather than the 125 it scored last time around. —AFP

In COVID-swamped Texas, patients die stranded in clinics

HOUSTON: Daniel Wilkinson survived two tours of duty in Afghanistan but died of gallstones, deteriorating slowly as his under-equipped doctors looked on helplessly. Wilkinson, 46, lived only 90 minutes by car or 30 minutes by helicopter from Houston, renowned for its top-flight hospitals. The problem is the Texas health care system has been utterly overwhelmed by people suffering from the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

In this wealthy state, 14,700 people were hospitalized as of September 1, just below a record set in January as a winter COVID wave wreaked havoc across America. "In the previous surges, we kept a little over 750 patients. Right now we've been running between 820 and 850 patients, so the hospitals are quite full," said Roberta Schwartz, executive vice president of Houston Methodist Hospital, which is actually a group of hospitals.

Things are so bad that a conference room at one of the facilities is being used to treat patients. So rural health facilities are being forced to keep patients they are not equipped to care for-like Wilkinson. He was admitted August 21 to the only hospital in his county, a block from his home in the town of Bellville, population 4,000. The clinic did not have the equipment to remove his gallstones, so it tried to organize a transfer by helicopter to another hospital.

"Our staff and our physician worked nonstop for over six hours trying to get him that transfer to a tertiary care center anywhere," said Daniel Bonk Fache, the CEO of Bellville Medical Center. "Our emergency room doctor at that time actually went on Facebook trying to get him transferred," said Bonk Fache. A doctor near the Texas capital Austin offered to take in Wilkinson, then called back five minutes later to say there was no room at his hospital.

Find a bed, somehow

"We get a few calls every day from rural hospital leaders that are just frantically trying to find a place to send these patients," said John Henderson, president of the Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals. Sprawling Texas has 158 such facilities, more than any other US state. Henderson said Wilkinson's case was not an isolated one. "I would say every day this week we've had a situation that didn't end well and resulted in a patient's death," said Johnson. Hospital staff feel powerless and overwhelmed by the frantic search for hospital beds somewhere bigger and more equipped.

"We lose" a nurse essentially every day, because that nurse has to call all of the hospitals in the surrounding areas to prove that we are doing our due diligence to get them elsewhere," said Renee Poulter, who manages the nursing staff at the Bellville clinic. "And that takes hours, hours if not the whole day spent phoning every hospital in the great state of Texas to see if anyone will accept your patient," she added. The Bellville facility is not designed to have an intensive care unit but like many, out of necessity, it had to fashion one.

"We have a critical, ICU-level COVID-positive patient at our rural facility that we have been taking care of for 11 days because we cannot find him a higher level of care," said Poulter. To help them, Texas is providing these uber-busy rural hospitals with respirators, oxygen and other means of stabilizing their patients. It is also bringing in nurses from other states. Two such helpers showed up last week in Bellville, one coming from Pennsylvania and the other from Alabama, each working six shifts per week. —AFP

Zionist mob killings bond grieving families but divide remains

LOD: Two men from Zionist entity who lost close relatives in sectarian mob violence, one Jewish and one Arab, have bonded in grief - but their contrasting pursuits of justice highlight a deep divide. Both are mourning loved ones who were killed in the mixed city of Lod during the spasm of inter-communal unrest that tore through Zionist entity during the latest Gaza war. Malek Hassuna, who is Arab, said his 31-year-old son Mussa, a scrap metal trader, was shot dead by Jewish vigilantes on May 10, leaving behind a wife and three children.

Effi Yehoshua, who is Jewish, said his 56-year-old brother Yigal, an electrician, was killed a day later when a rain of stones hit his car. He was survived by his wife and two children. Seven Arab suspects have been indicted in Yigal's killing, police said. Four Jewish suspects were arrested in Mussa's death, but then released, with no indictments filed. "This is not justice," said Hassuna, 62, who recounted how he was mourning his son when he heard that Yigal, his work colleague, had died.

"Yigal was my friend," Hassuna said. He said he visit-

ed Yigal's grieving family and told them, "your pain is my pain". The two bereaved men began exchanging messages and voice notes. Months later, sitting on Hassuna's couch, Yehoshua, 58, told AFP: "Every time the wound opens, it hurts. It tries to heal and it opens again, and for Malek, the wound doesn't heal either."

Finding the truth

Both men say their loved ones moved easily between the Jewish and Arab communities of Lod, a working-class city of around 80,000 people. About a third of residents are Arab citizens of Zionist state, the descendants of Palestinians who remained after Zionist state's 1948 founding. For years, Jews and Arabs shared Lod, though Arab residents complained of unequal treatment in housing and land.

The calm was shattered in May when unprecedented violence by Arab rioters and Jewish vigilantes left synagogues smouldering, Muslim gravestones smashed, and cars charred along the city's roads. Tensions had flared nationwide after police stormed Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque in response to worshippers throwing rocks and explosives. The fighting exploded when Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas fired rockets and Zionist entity pounded the blockaded enclave with intense airstrikes. "Lod never had anything like this in 70 years," Yehoshua said.

The Arab suspects indicted over Yigal's death included two West Bank residents and five Zionists, police said. According to the charges, the defendants

between \$7.50 and \$10 an hour, just above the minimum wage at the time.

They didn't know it then but the exposure to asbestos and other toxic materials brought the risk of cancer, asbestosis and a host of respiratory illnesses, as well as post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. "I don't like to remember Ground Zero anniversaries," Gil said tearfully at a recent session of the 9/11 Latino cleaners support group Fronteras de Esperanza, or Borders of Hope, which still meets two decades on. She remembers that after working so many hours, sometimes finding human remains, she would go home and thought she was still cleaning. "I almost freaked out," Gil recalled.

'Injustice'

Gil, like all the cleaners spoken to AFP, cannot work because of illnesses believed to be derived from the 9/11 operation. They dream of becoming legal residents so they can receive benefits and live without the threat of deportation. In 2017, a then-Democratic representative from New York even introduced a bill regarding this but it was never debated in Congress.

"That the people who cleaned do not have papers is an injustice because they lost the most precious thing, which is health," Rubielia Arias, another cleaner, told

opportunity to realize concepts that they had been thinking about for years. "We were thinking it's the beginning of the millennium, we were thinking that this had to be the next generation of buildings, both in terms of safety, as well as environmental impact," recalled Lewis.

Among the most nightmarish images from 9/11 are those of people jumping to their deaths from the towers to escape the blaze. The architects launched ideas about how to evacuate people other than from the stairs. Inventors came back with a giant chute, and a zip wire, with a parachutist demonstrating the latter, Lewis remembers. "It was the scariest thing," he says. "We just couldn't imagine someone who might be a little bit overweight or a little bit afraid taking a jump out the window." In the end, the only solution was to shield the heart of the building with reinforced concrete, "broad enough that people can get out of there," he explained. The architects implemented safety standards on One WTC that have since become standard for skyscrapers. They include wide stairwells to allow a quick evacuation of the 104-storey tower, a signaling light to alert aircraft, fire-resistant cameras and communication tools on every floor to allow rescuers to constantly monitor the situation. —AFP



LOD: Malek Hassuna (left) carries a picture of his late son Mussa (center-right), who was shot dead by Jewish vigilantes on May 10, poses for a picture with Effi Yehoshua (right) as he carries a picture of his late brother Yigal. —AFP

hurled rocks through Yigal's car windows, cracking his skull and causing fatal brain damage. Effi Yehoshua said he attends every court hearing for his brother's alleged killers. "I believe in the legal system, believe in the security forces, that they will arrest these people and give them what they deserve," he said. In the case of Mussa's shooting, police questioned four Jewish suspects but later released them. "Zionist entity makes a distinction, that it's very normal for an Arab to die in cold blood," Hassuna said.



NEW YORK: Clinical social worker Rosa Bramble (center) of 'Borders of Hope' attends a group meeting for immigrant ground zero clean-up workers of the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks, at her office. —AFP

AFP in the modest room she rents in Queens with the help of her son. The now 57-year-old Colombian has been fighting for years for the Hispanic cleaners to be legally recognized. She herself was at the site and has since suffered from various respiratory and stomach illnesses, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental ailments. —AFP



NEW YORK: This file photo shows the One World Trade Center tower under construction in New York. It is the skyscraper that replaced the Twin Towers in New York's skyline. —AFP

9/11: Ground Zero's forgotten cleaners demand recognition

NEW YORK: Lucely Gil is one of the forgotten victims of 9/11: An immigrant cleaner who spent months clearing up rubble from the World Trade Center and developed cancer apparently from the toxic dust, but who remains unrecognized. At 7:00 am on September 15, 2001, the Colombian entered the immense ash cloud left by the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York. She would collect debris there for up to 12 hours a day, every day, for six months.

Twenty years later, the 65-year-old is still an undocumented migrant and lives with the consequences of that herculean effort: She is a breast cancer survivor, a common illness for women who worked at the site, has lost movement in one arm and suffers depression. For eight months after the attacks, tens of thousands of people-many of them immigrants-cleaned Ground Zero and nearby damaged buildings. They removed 1.8 million tons of rubble from the area and were paid

'Freedom Tower' - The skyscraper symbolizing New York's resilience

NEW YORK: It is the skyscraper that replaced the Twin Towers in New York's skyline. Inaugurated in 2014, the One World Trade Center has become a symbol of resilience after the horror of 9/11. Commonly referred to as the "Freedom Tower," it is America's tallest building at 1,776 feet (541 meters) and an emblem of the US economic capital. From its conception, the tower had to testify to New York's durability - looking to the future despite the tragedy - according to one of its architects, Kenneth Lewis.

As harrowing as the images were of the Twin Towers collapsing to the ground on September 11, 2001, no one questioned replacing them with another skyscraper, situated right next "Ground Zero." For the architects at SOM, which builds skyscrapers around the world, it was an