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# **Gender Policy and Authoritarian Flexibility: The Women's Quota in Morocco as an Instrument of Regime Support**

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to answer the following question: How has the hybrid nature of the Moroccan political system resulted in political liberalisation and liberal reforms that expanded opportunities for women's political empowerment in elected institutions, without making the regime vulnerable to the uncertainty of genuine democracy? Since the 2002 elections and the 2011 constitutional and legal reforms, the Moroccan regime has been among the hybrid political regimes that have formulated policies to empower women in elected institutions through a quota system, primarily to bolster the regime rather than consolidate democracy. This study shows that the numerical increase in women elected to the House of Representatives on the national list did not so much achieve true political empowerment as introduce a new glass ceiling that limits women's candidacy and election outside the designated women's list. Moreover, in many electoral cycles, the quota system has become less an instrument for political empowerment and the enhancement of female representation than a means of social reproduction and a tool to serve and reinforce political clientelism and party patronage.

**Keywords:** Gender Politics; Women's Quota; Hybrid Political Systems; Morocco; Political Empowerment

## **Introduction**

Political scientists have long been interested in how formal and informal political institutions—electoral systems, legislative agendas, and the representative roles of parliamentarians—are shaped. With the major electoral reforms of past decades, which have had a profound impact on representative democracy, the issue of gender has been introduced into elections through a quota system. More than one hundred democratic and non-democratic states have adopted voluntary or mandatory gender quotas in an attempt to address the underrepresentation of women in national and local legislative assemblies.<sup>1</sup>

With the end of the 1980s, the future of Arab regimes became dependent on the extent of their political openness in a new global order whose features were drawn by the narrative of ‘ends’, articulated in American thinker Francis Fukuyama’s thesis about the ‘end of history’.<sup>2</sup> In Fukuyama’s formulation, the global victory of liberalism prompted numerous Arab authoritarian regimes to adopt human rights issues and abide by international conventions, among them those relevant to women’s rights. The Moroccan political system was naturally not immune to these new challenges and by the early 1990s it found itself facing new types of demands, spurring it to recognise women’s issues.

The question of women’s empowerment in Moroccan political institutions came to the fore in the context of the political opening, which led to the adoption of a set of policies that aimed to expand social participation under the umbrella of an ascendent political liberalism. The reforms instituted demonstrated the openness of the authoritarian system—so-called ‘liberalised authoritarianism’<sup>3</sup>— seen in the expanding margin for freedom of expression and party organisation, and legislative and local elections. Nevertheless, these reforms were insufficient in dismantling the authoritarian structure of the regime, which continues to dominate strategic decision making, co-existing with elections that do not threaten its durability.<sup>4</sup>

This study attempts to answer the following question: How has the hybridisation of the Moroccan political system led to political openness and liberal reforms that expanded opportunities for women’s political empowerment in elected institutions, without making the regime vulnerable to the uncertainty of genuine democracy? This question rests on the observation that although Morocco has formulated women-friendly policies, working to empower women in elected institutions through the adoption of a quota system, since the elections of 2002 and after the constitutional and legal reforms brought about by the social protest movement of 2011, the nature of the political and partisan landscape has precluded genuine empowerment. In turn, political empowerment has become a superficial reform lacking any strategic vision: liberalisation without democratic horizons.

Despite the growing body of research on women’s participation in Morocco, most of it has failed to address the issue in the context of institutional authoritarianism, thus obscuring the nature of the undemocratic political regime and stripping that research of its critical value. Any objective study of women’s participation in political institutions requires an understanding of the characteristics of institutions that claim to embrace political empowerment, for women’s political empowerment in political institutions cannot be understood separately from the nature of the institutions themselves.

This research paper employs a theoretical framework that draws on the literature on state feminism in undemocratic regimes, in order to link local issues with more general theoretical debates. The methodological approach adopted here relies on a descriptive analysis of the contexts that govern the implementation of political empowerment policies through a quota and explores how the constitutional and legal reforms instituted from 2002 to 2011 were translated into actual political empowerment for Moroccan women. In doing so, it draws on Arab and non-Arab research on women’s quotas in Morocco and elsewhere, as well as women politicians and rights advocates’

attitudes towards and perceptions of the quota, as expressed in interviews and focus groups discussed in the literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since the end of the third wave of democratisation in the late twentieth century, comparative research has increasingly focused on factors that inhibit democratisation and enhance the resilience of authoritarian regimes. Recent research has focused on the performance of authoritarian regimes in the realm of economic development and service provision and how this strengthens or weakens authoritarianism. In contrast, less attention has been given by researchers to policies of authoritarian regimes aimed at empowering women within political institutions in order to maintain regime rule.<sup>5</sup>

Authoritarian regimes typically rely on a combination of strategies to cement their hold on power. In addition to suppressing opposition forces, they tend to open up to and co-opt the largest number of strategic actors possible through a process of selective political inclusion, in order to make their undemocratic rule more resilient. This led many authoritarian regimes to incorporate gender issues into their political agendas, and link them to strategies of legitimation, polarisation, or 'divide and rule' in order to strengthen their authoritarian institutional structures.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1970s, the United Nation's growing interest in women's rights drew greater attention to gender issues. This was first felt in Western democracies, after which the debate on 'state feminism' moved outside the Western world and gained salience in post-socialist political systems and authoritarian regimes in developing countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Authoritarian regimes put policies and laws in place aimed at promoting gender equality through instruments such as quota systems. Yet often the primary motive for such measures was less the advancement of women's rights per se than the preservation of regime power.<sup>7</sup>

As authoritarian regimes opened up politically at the end of the 1980s, they introduced liberal political reforms and devoted greater attention to improving women's status, but without loosening their iron grip on power. These regimes sought to introduce quotas, ostensibly to promote women's political rights, though in fact they undermined these rights in practice.

The mere presence of women in authoritarian political institutions does not necessarily mean that these regimes are moving towards democracy and political equality if such moves are not coupled with radical transformation in the structure of the authoritarian regime. For example, Rwanda boasts the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world, at 61.3 per cent, but it is nevertheless an authoritarian country where feminist critics and activists have faced real repression.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, authoritarian regimes have come to promote women's empowerment in parliament by adopting quotas and articulate a compelling discourse on women's rights in international forums in an attempt to market a false portrait of their rigid rule, even as they act systematically and continually to violate other human rights.<sup>9</sup>

Through this sleight of hand, authoritarian regimes seek to gain political support, insulate their systems, and give the impression that domestic change is proceeding apace. For them, promoting women's rights is less politically costly than providing 'coordination goods'—civil rights, freedom of expression, free and fair elections—which carry more democratic uncertainty and threaten fragile authoritarian regimes.<sup>10</sup>

As such, many liberalised authoritarian regimes seek to legitimise themselves by portraying their piecemeal actions on women's rights as important steps towards democracy. This strategy is part of a broader attempt to demonstrate their compliance with international standards for democracy and good governance. Women's rights are often exploited by these regimes for political ends, in order to show that democratisation has begun in earnest.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, some authoritarian regimes use feminism as a strategy for winning international assistance, by co-opting and integrating feminist activists within patronage networks.<sup>12</sup>

### **Political Openness and the Emergence of Hybrid Regimes**

Morocco's experience of political and constitutional reform in the early 1990s did not conform to the conventional paradigm of democratic transition<sup>13</sup> (liberalisation, breakthrough, consolidation<sup>14</sup>). Rather, it led to the emergence of a political system whose institutions, rules, and logic defy the linear model of democratisation.<sup>15</sup> The failure to bolster these reforms with democratic institutions and practices that would revive political life and instil much needed dynamism to politics in turn gave rise to political stagnation.<sup>16</sup>

Morocco is thus still classified as a hybrid regime despite more than two decades of constitutional and political reforms and the accompanying narratives of consensual rotation, democratic transition, and a new era. The 2020 Democracy Index prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit identified Morocco as a hybrid political system and ranked it ninety-six among 167 countries, with an overall score of 5.04 out of a possible 10. Morocco scored poorly on all five categories examined by the index: 5.25 (out of 10) in pluralistic elections; 4.64 on government performance; 5.56 on political participation; 4.12 on civil liberties; and 5.63 on political culture.<sup>17</sup>

A hybrid regime is a political system that combines democratic elements with highly authoritarian features. Legitimacy in hybrid regimes does not rest on divine will or family origins, and they do not employ severe violence or coercion to maintain power to the degree that classic dictatorships do.<sup>18</sup> A feature of hybrid regimes is weak boundaries of domestic pluralism or the prior delineation of acceptable pluralism with a dose of democracy, as well as the failure of these regimes to stabilise their institutions.<sup>19</sup>

Although the third wave of democratic transition brought a major shift in the political structures of many developing states, the process of democratisation has taken various winding paths, typically reflecting the historical experiences and cumulative institutional architecture of each country.

When Mohammed VI assumed the throne in 1999, he found a political system that had begun to hybridise, thanks to the political opening and set of legal reforms launched by his father, Hassan

II, in the early 1990s. For example, the 1992 constitution states that Morocco adheres to universally recognised human rights, and in 1994, the state amnestied numerous political prisoners who had been disappeared and imprisoned in the so-called Years of Lead in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>20</sup> This transformation took place within a new institutional climate supportive of democratic values and under pressure from the European Parliament, which refused to provide aid to Morocco because of its human rights record.<sup>21</sup>

These reforms were instituted in the shadow of a grim legacy of human rights abuses during the Years of Lead, when state violence was meted out not only to men, but women and children as well. Despite the major sacrifices women made to liberate their country from colonialism and its violence, after independence Moroccan women were excluded politically and vulnerable to violations and social discrimination; they were also subject to political violations not only because of their political activity and rebellion, but due to their gender.<sup>22</sup>

King Mohammed VI's assumption to the throne in 1999 represented a major shift. He anchored the policy of political openness by leading the state in a 'modern' and 'renewing' way, and his reign has been marked by important liberal reforms. For example, he completed the draft of an amended family code that his father began months before his death. Most significantly, the amended code raised the age of marriage from fifteen to eighteen, gave women the right to consensual divorce, limited men's right to unilateral divorce, and put restrictions on polygamy.<sup>23</sup>

Although these modernising reforms brought the Moroccan political system out of its closed authoritarian cocoon and placed it in the club of resilient authoritarianism or hybrid regimes, they were ultimately cosmetic and did not shake the authoritarian structure of the political system. The monarchy continues to dominate the constitutional order and decision making. And despite significant constitutional reforms in 2011 in response to demands for political and institutional change during the Arab Spring, the monarchy has continued to be a central political player, as reflected in the magnitude of powers and prerogatives the constitution vests in it. The king is the head of state and its highest representative (Article 42) and the commander of the faithful, the protector of religion and sect, and the guarantor of the freedom to practise religion (Article 41).<sup>24</sup>

### **Moroccan Feminism and Storming the Public Sphere**

Moroccan women were unable to penetrate the iron-clad party structure, remaining on the institutional side-lines within political parties, even those that purport to be modern and democratic. This was due first and foremost to the continued sway of old mentalities and practices. Political organisations had still not purged their 'modern' political discourse of the patriarchal cultural legacy and its imprint on political culture. Society's traditional mentalities continued to favour men over women, as demonstrated by the patriarchal structure of most areas of daily life.

The patriarchal nature of public space posed major challenges to women's political participation in public affairs. Any political initiative to bring women into the public sphere was often viewed with scepticism, and women themselves were often considered unfit to assume public duty. These

stereotypes, shaped by conventional patriarchal culture, made it difficult for political parties to support initiatives and projects to bolster women's presence in politics.

Women's exclusion from politics and public positions in Morocco spurred their involvement in civic associations as a means of resistance and a way to exert influence and engage in politics. This laid the groundwork for the emergence of feminism, as various women's associations were formed and evolved to struggle for women's rights, raise awareness of women's status, and enhance their role in society.<sup>25</sup> Associations raised women's awareness of issues related to education and laws that could hinder or restrict their access to the public sphere, such as the family and employment laws. This civic dynamism contributed greatly to the articulation of a feminist discourse based on democratic principles and human rights.

The emergence of feminist organisations in Morocco was a response to the crisis of the nation-state model, which was unable to keep its promises of political and social modernisation after independence. These organisations enriched the public sphere with a rights discourse that championed women's causes, which in turn generated a social dynamism by mobilising oppressed women. These organisations also played a role in fighting against gender inequality while also spotlighting issues of democracy and social justice and challenging conventional thought, repressive practices, and gender bias. This social dynamic posed new challenges to government development policies and made space for new ways of thinking about gender issues.<sup>26</sup>

The women's movement in Morocco did not sit on the side-lines of the social struggle. Political transformations in Morocco starting in the early 1990s spurred it to demand institutional and legislative reforms. In 1992, the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women launched the one-million signature campaign, devised during its conference in December 1991 in Rabat, to demand changes to the personal status code. This new feminist dynamic marked a shift from the stage of organisational building and intellectual and ideological formation to the stage of demand-oriented struggle that sought to strengthen women's rights in accordance with the internationally recognised human rights system.<sup>27</sup>

The dynamism of the women's movement spurred the government of Abderrahmane Youssoufi in 1999 to announce the National Plan to Incorporate Women in Development, drafted by Said Saadi, the minister tasked with the advancement of women's conditions, in concert with various forward-looking women's forums energised by the approval of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<sup>28</sup> The national plan aimed to improve the status of women in education, literacy, and reproductive health, integrate women economically, and enhance their legal status.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the modernising bent of the plan, it met with fierce resistance from the Moroccan Islamist movement, particularly the section related to the personal status and family code. The movement led a packed march in Casablanca on 10 March 2000, prompting modernising forces to respond with a counter-march in the capital in support of the national plan.

This sharp polarisation between modernisers and conservatives marked a real crisis for reforms to improve women's institutional conditions and rights. As a result, some feminist organisations called on the king to step in and arbitrate. The king appointed a consultative committee with

multiple areas of expertise to propose a thorough-going review of the personal status code that would take into consideration the social transformations seen in the country and social and cultural trends in Moroccan society. King Mohammed VI referred to this moment in a speech in 2003, saying, ‘In addition to the actions taken to advance the status of women and show them fair treatment, we have not hesitated to spare society the consequences of strife over this issue’.<sup>30</sup>

Royal arbitration is a conventional mechanism for resolving conflicts between various political actors, allowing for the preservation of an equilibrium and the protection of the status quo while also permitting the monarchy to extend its influence into politics. Throughout its entire existence, the monarchy has played the role of arbiter—a function that grew out of the divisive nature of Moroccan society.<sup>31</sup> The monarchy’s role as arbiter is less a product of the Moroccan state’s post-independence political experience than a traditional practice with historical roots embedded deep in the structure of the elite political establishment (the Makhzen) as a system for adjudication and equilibrium.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Women’s Quota as a New Policy**

The quota is a pro-active measure that aims to ameliorate the underrepresentation of women in political institutions. Originally adopted by political parties in Norway during the 1970s, it has since flourished and spread widely in various regions and political contexts around the world. It also spurred many intellectual and political debates when it was posed as a political mechanism that could be adopted to improve the political conditions for women’s participation. It has been argued that the quota system permits women’s political mobilisation, provides political elites with strategic incentives, and makes existing political standards consistent with international policies and standards for political participation.<sup>33</sup>

International pressure for women’s political participation gave women’s organisations a political opportunity to raise women’s awareness of the importance of demanding their political rights and improving their representation in elected institutions long dominated by men. In this context, feminist organisations proposed a quota in response to the global evolution of gender equality concepts. Women’s organisations in Morocco are among the most important domestic supporters of women’s rights, demonstrated by the formation of the Committee for the Participation of Women in Political Life in 1993 in Casablanca.<sup>34</sup>

The demand for women’s political empowerment has been an overriding concern of women’s organisations in Morocco since the beginning of the 1990s. These organisations submitted proposals to the relevant authorities to encourage women’s representation, such as guaranteeing at least ten per cent of nominations for women. The reform of the electoral law in the summer of 2002 gave them the political opportunity to press their demands to enhance women’s political participation, and they submitted a demand memorandum (the project for electoral law review) with a view to improving institutional provisions for women in political decision-making positions. The memorandum attributed the underrepresentation of women to the lack of political will and

asserted that amending the election law would give the government an opportunity to express its genuine will in order to strengthen women's political empowerment.<sup>35</sup>

The monarchy played a pivotal role in promoting the rights issues of women's organisations. Ruling elites in Morocco were well aware that including women in political life by use of a quota would have important political benefits. It would bolster the legitimacy of political institutions domestically and they could capitalise on it internationally in a global climate where gender equality was an increasingly prominent issue. Women's participation would also be evidence of democratic legitimacy and political modernity.

The central position of the king in the Moroccan political system encouraged the women's movement to demand a quota system, especially after the second speech of King Mohammed VI, given on 20 August 1999 to mark the forty-sixth anniversary of the revolution of the king and the people. 'How can a society progress and prosper', the king said, 'when the interests of women, who make half of this society, are disregarded without consideration for the rights granted them by the true religion, although they now compete with men, whether in the field of knowledge or work'.<sup>36</sup>

King Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in 1999 was coupled with a narrative of a 'new era', and the 2002 legislative elections were the first test of the intention to bring political change. Political forces committed themselves to holding fair and transparent elections, and this was reinforced by political and electoral reforms aimed at increasing citizen turnout in the elections and restoring confidence in Moroccan politics. Measures taken to this end included lowering the voting age from twenty to eighteen and adopting a quota for women guaranteeing them ten per cent of parliamentary seats.

The use of a quota to politically empower Moroccan women increased political participation. Women had only breached the walls of parliament in 1993, when two women won seats in the House of Representatives. This highlighted the need to eliminate inequities and marginalisation, and consider political mechanisms that could enhance their presence in elected institutions.<sup>37</sup> In this context, Morocco adopted a consensual quota for women. Law 29.02 supplementing and amending Law 31.97 on the House of Representatives was amended to provide for the division of electoral districts into two categories: local electoral districts with 295 seats and national electoral districts with thirty seats, which the Ministry of Interior and political parties agreed to allocate to women.<sup>38</sup>

As a result of this agreement, thirty-five women entered the parliament in 2002, a qualitative leap in representation, which rose from 0.06 per cent in the two legislative terms from 1993 to 1997 to 10.8 per cent after the 2002 elections. This increase bumped Morocco from 111th to 69th place globally for parliamentary representation of women. However, with the elections of 7 September 2007, the number of women elected fell from thirty-five to thirty-four. While this may seem like a slight quantitative decline, it had a strong impact on the comparative international level, downgrading Morocco from 2nd to 7th on the Arab level and from 69th to 98th internationally.<sup>39</sup>

## **The Arab Spring as an Opportunity to Enhance Women's Political Conditions**

The events of the Arab Spring, and the extensive constitutional and legislative reforms that accompanied it, gave the Moroccan women's movement a great opportunity to present its visions and demands to the consultative committee tasked with amending the constitution, whose method of operation differed from previous constitutional committees. However, the proposal put forward by the women's movement did not go beyond formal procedures for political empowerment and failed to address the question of democracy<sup>40</sup> as the basic guarantee for the rotation of power and independent decision-making.

Written in the context of the protests sweeping the Arab world, including Morocco, the 2011 constitution included a package of basic rights and freedoms in keeping with protestors' demands, condensed into the trio of freedom, dignity, and social justice. The framers of the constitution thus amended Article 19 of the 1996 constitution with its traditional symbolic valence to be more 'modern and progressive'. The amended text stated, 'Men and women enjoy equal civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights and freedoms', and affirmed that the state 'seeks to achieve the principle of parity between men and women. To this end, a commission for parity and combating all forms of discrimination shall be created'.<sup>41</sup>

This reformist trajectory was reinforced by a law with provisions to support female and youth representation in the House of Representatives. Out of a total of 395 seats in the national electoral district, at least sixty would be set aside for female candidates and thirty for young people under the age of forty.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the Ministry of Social Development, Family and Solidarity was strengthened in 2012 by adding the women's sector to its responsibilities, and its name was changed to the Ministry of Social Development, Family, Solidarity and Women.

Despite the gains for Moroccan women enshrined in the 2011 constitution, path dependence continued to exert a pull on politics. Of the thirty-one ministers in the first government after the 2011 constitution, one was a woman, Bassima Hakkaoui, from the Justice and Development Party. Moroccan women's organisations denounced this regression, which some saw as reversal of the gains achieved by women in previous years, when they held seven portfolios in the government led by the Istiqlal (Independence) Party in 2007.

## **The Women's Quota: Political Empowerment or Glass Ceiling?**

Some research on state feminism shows that non-democratic regimes often enact women-friendly policies for the purpose of maintaining power as opposed to genuine political empowerment.<sup>43</sup> Gender policy therefore becomes a tool to create a glass ceiling for women within elected institutions, which means that reserving seats for women has little impact on actual political empowerment.

Krook argues that although reserved seats for women in Morocco increased nominal female representation, it simultaneously introduced a new glass ceiling,<sup>44</sup> making the political representation of women symbolic. So while the quota was able to bring more women into the

parliament within two decades of implementation, representation remains quantitative rather than qualitative. The quota alone is insufficient to secure real political representation for Moroccan women, which is reflected in the underrepresentation of women on local lists.

Table 1: Evolution of women's representation in the Moroccan House of Representatives (1977 to 2021)<sup>45</sup>

Date	Candidates	Winners	Percentage
1977	8	0	0
1984	15	0	0
1993	33	2	0.6
1997	69	2	0.06
2002	964 (266 on local lists, 698 on national list)	35 (5 in local districts, 30 by national quota)	10.8
2007	780 (on national list/quota; local candidates unavailable)	34 (4 in local districts, 30 by national quota)	10.6
2011	1,624 (464 local, 1,160 on national list)	67 (7 local, 60 by national quota)	17
2016	Unavailable	81 (10 local, 71 by national quota)	21.18
2021	2,329	95 (5 local, 90 by national quota)	24.3

Table 1 shows that the increase in women's representation in the House of Representatives is attributable to the national lists designated for women. The number of women parliamentarians increased significantly between 2002 and 2021, reflecting the dynamism and mobilisation generated by the quota system. This is especially so after Law 27.11 on the House of Representatives, enacted as part of the constitutional and legal reforms pressed for by the protest movement in 2011, increased the number of seats reserved for women from thirty to sixty, out of a total of 395 seats in the House of Representatives; in contrast, local lists remained largely stable. Electoral rules in Morocco are affected by the nature of the political game, which lacks many democratic components. Institutional arrangements thus prevent female parliamentarians from building a local constituency that can be leveraged to ensure lasting electoral and political support.

It appears that empowerment via the quota did not catch on and spread to local districts and thus increase the number of women elected in these constituencies. In effect, the quota introduced a new glass ceiling that prevented women from running for office and being elected in excess of the quota requirements. Moreover, this fragile representational model did not help many women who were initially elected due the quota to be later elected to local district seats. It should be remembered here that the design of the Moroccan quota system precludes incumbency for women, barring them from nomination on the national list more than once.

This dilemma was voiced by a former parliamentarian for the left-wing Socialist Union of Popular Forces: 'I was elected on the national list for women. After that, I was not allowed to run again on the same list, so I ran on the local list in another region. But due to the lack of support

from the party or other women, and the fact that I was running against a former minister, I lost'. She emphasised that 'the lack of party support indirectly discourages women from running in local constituencies'.<sup>46</sup>

### *Political empowerment or cosmetic reform?*

If the quota system allowed better institutional and political representation for Moroccan women—women made up eleven per cent of parliamentarians after the 2002 legislative elections and 21.18 per cent after the 2021 elections—it nevertheless remains low compared with some states close to Morocco.

Table 2: Ranking of North African countries on women's parliamentary representation<sup>47</sup>

State	No. of women MPs	No. of total MPs	% of women	Ranking in North Africa	Ranking in Arab world	Ranking in Africa	Global ranking
Algeria	119	462	25.8	2	3	16	65
Tunisia	76	217	35	1	1	11	43
Morocco	81	395	20.5	3	9	25	94

Although the Moroccan feminist movement found the idea of using a women's quota to enter previously inaccessible political space compelling, it ran up against party institutions that did not practise internal democracy. As Professor Farid Al-Marini said, 'The lack of democracy within Moroccan parties is a general phenomenon', which in his view reflects 'the ideological vacuum and the absence of genuine, independent political projects. It is no coincidence that most internal party conflicts are personal and are governed more by the logic of charismatic or clan loyalties than legal procedures and the principles of democratic administration'.<sup>48</sup>

The institutional structure of political parties is an obstacle to the proper implementation of projects and initiatives that would support women's participation in political structures, and parties that present themselves as modern and progressive are no exception. Although they may advance demands for equality and social justice in their campaign speeches and slogans, the slogans tend to give way to male leaders' political ambitions. As feminist activist Khadija al-Rabbah said, 'There is a difference between discourse and practice: a discourse that speaks of equality and a practice that is still far from following through on it'.<sup>49</sup>

Women's access to positions of responsibility is blocked not only by their candidacy through the quota system. In addition, female candidates, whether at the presidential or representative level, are often pressured into making concessions in the minutes, asserting their unwillingness to assume certain positions of responsibility. This is 'a retreat from and a blow to the struggle of the women's movement, and a violation of the requirements of the constitution, and it reveals the extent to which patriarchal mentalities insist on restricting women to social roles only'.<sup>50</sup>

Although Article 17 of Law 113.14 relating to territorial collectives stipulates that at least one-third of candidates for vice-presidents must be women, a number of women have refused to assume this position of responsibility, leaving it to men. For example, in the elections for the Rabat

communal council, only two female vice presidents were elected instead of the four stipulated by law. According to a councillor who did not wish to reveal her name, ‘It was not the women’s choice. Rather, the choice was made pursuant to tribal agreements in order to preserve the existing alliance, and women typically comply with their parties’ directives’.<sup>51</sup>

This was confirmed by some female parliamentarians who told researcher Darhour Hanane that ‘the quota system makes women prominent, but puts them on the side-lines of many difficult political issues’. They also stressed that ‘the mechanisms for reforming the quota system refer directly to the principles of charitable work and do not in any way entail respect for the basic human rights of women’.<sup>52</sup> A local consultant also expressed her dissatisfaction with the gender quota system, saying, ‘Where are we in terms of equality and parity? The attitudes of political parties and society are negative. We consider the quota a gift and we [women] are merely decorative. We assume no responsibility and are limited to social, sports, or cultural committees. Nepotism prevails—girl, sister, daughter. At this level everything was already divided; The road to equality is still very long’.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, clientelism and family kinship govern the selection of female candidates on some parties’ electoral lists. Often party leaders utilise political empowerment mechanisms to place their wives, daughters, and female relatives at the top of the party’s parliamentary list, as demonstrated by the following table.

Table 3: Network of familial relationship of female parliamentarians in the 2011–2016 legislative term<sup>54</sup>

Parliamentarian	Party	Nature of kinship relationship
<b>Hanan Abu al-Fath</b>	National Rally of Independents	Niece of party leader al-Moti Benqadour
<b>Mina Bouhudhud</b>	National Rally of Independents	Daughter of party leader Bouhudhud Boudalal
<b>Rahma Taritah</b>	National Rally of Independents	Daughter of party leader Ahmed Taritah
<b>Zeinab Qayouh</b>	Istiqlal Party	Wife of party Secretary-General Hamid Shabat
<b>Yasmina Badou</b>	Istiqlal Party	Daughter of former party leader Abd al-Rahman Badou and wife of party leader Ali al-Fassi al-Fahri
<b>Ruqayya al-Dirham</b>	Socialist Union	Sister of party leader Hassan al-Dirham
<b>Khadija al-Yamlahi</b>	Socialist Union	Wife of MP Abd al-Hadi Khairat
<b>Hasna Abu Zeid</b>	Socialist Union	Wife of party leader Salem al-Shakkaf
<b>Jamila Afif</b>	Authenticity and Modernity Party	Wife of party leader al-Habib Ben al-Taleb
<b>Ruqayya al-Ramid</b>	Justice and Development Party	Sister of party leader Mustafa al-Ramid

As this network of female parliamentarians' kinship ties shows, an instrument for women's political empowerment and improved parliamentary representation has been transformed into a mechanism for what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls social reproduction. From a legislative institution representing the nation, the parliament has become a family assembly, including man and wife, sister and daughter. When implemented in the Moroccan political and institutional space, the quota system was adapted to the clientelism of institutions embracing women's empowerment.

This was confirmed by a Moroccan feminist activist who fought for the adoption of the quota: 'Even if women demanded higher representation through the quota, nominations for electoral lists puts women face to face with the new patriarchal system represented by political parties in Morocco, which turns the quota into an umbrella for party leaders' wives or other close relatives, who suddenly appear at the top of the women's list'. She added, 'Appointment to party positions is subject to a high degree of centralisation, which prevents the establishment of independent electoral districts within parties and strengthens centralised control and inherited practices'.<sup>55</sup>

As this makes clear, what determines women's position in the top slots of the national list is not determination, competence, political positions, or even geographic origin. Rather, it is the mainly male network of relations that can secure advanced positions for women on the national list and win a parliamentary seat with the least possible trouble.<sup>56</sup> This was confirmed by the statements of some activists of the leftist Socialist Union who said that 'women elected through the quota system are typically portrayed as "symbols" or "proxy women". They have no real political power because they often owe their position to their political party or family ties, especially to fathers or husbands'.<sup>57</sup>

This was confirmed by the findings of Lauren,<sup>58</sup> who stated that reserved seats are seen as serving patronage politics, enhancing the importance of family ties and the influence of the leader. In line with this proposition, Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi asserts that the selection of female candidates for the national women's list does not reward activism and effectiveness, but instead follows the logic of clientelism.<sup>59</sup>

The clientelism of the party system in Morocco is less a modern phenomenon than a structural feature that has dictated the evolution of the system. According to American researcher William Zartman, the struggle for independence in Morocco did not produce ideological parties; rather, it produced interest groups. The clientelist party, Zartman says, is one of the constants of Moroccan political life. In his view, parties are motivated less by doctrine than by common interests and reciprocal obligations.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Political empowerment or liberalisation without democracy?***

The political empowerment of women in Morocco has not moved in tandem with political forces' aspirations for democratic change. While the election of 27 September 2002 that brought thirty women into the parliament was a milestone for female political empowerment, the same election was a setback for Morocco's nascent democracy and marked the collapse of the narrative of democratic transition or what Moroccans call 'consensual rotation'.<sup>61</sup> Although the leftist Socialist

Union of Popular Forces came in first after winning fifty seats in the election, on 9 October 2002, the king appointed technocrat Driss Jettou as prime minister although he did not belong to the parliamentary majority.

In addition, the king appointed figures outside the government majority to lead the so-called sovereign ministries: Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Endowments and Islamic Affairs. In other words, they did not pass the test of popular choice, a major principle of procedural democracy. This prompted the Political Bureau of the Socialist Union to issue its famous statement on ‘the deviation from the democratic method’ on 28 November 2003.<sup>62</sup>

The September 2021 elections were conducted under an electoral law<sup>63</sup> that was significantly reformed to promote women’s political empowerment in various elected political institutions. The amended law allocated one-third of the seats in prefectorial and regional councils to women, as well as sixty of the 395 parliamentary seats designated for party lists. But other amendments to the law were described as undemocratic, most importantly the new electoral quotient for the distribution of parliamentary seats, which counts registered non-voters as well as valid votes cast. Al-Basek Manar, a specialist in Moroccan elections, expressed his astonishment at this change, calling it ‘an aberration with no cognate in international experiences’.<sup>64</sup>

The political empowerment of Moroccan women cannot be separated from democracy, as it is difficult to establish effective political institutions that promote genuine political empowerment for women absent a foundation and climate allowing for the rotation of power and access to decision-making institutions. As institutions, Moroccan political parties have little political power to make decisions and express social interests within the political sphere. Decision-making remains concentrated in the hands of the monarchy, which does not view itself merely as a ruling authority, and has worked since independence to position itself above political and social actors.<sup>65</sup>

Other political experiences, especially European ones, show that women’s causes have advanced and flourished under liberal democracy, while democracy has also been strengthened by incorporating women into representative institutions. This would not have happened without specific political mechanisms, whether voluntary, as is the case in most Scandinavian countries, or codified in law, as exists in most other states. However, pursuing a gender-based policy in an undemocratic political environment and posing it as an internal democratic issue may distort the very essence of the cause. In this way, women’s political representation becomes a tool by which authoritarian regimes seek to bolster the credibility of their political institutions.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, political scientist Jennifer Gandhi concludes that the policy of women’s political empowerment could still offer an opportunity to push these regimes to adapt to democratic imperatives. In her book, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*, Gandhi writes, ‘Legislative bodies, parties, and social movements can have a positive influence on politics in non-democratic countries. Under pressure, political leaders may make concessions in order to neutralise threats and continue cooperation’.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to understand the impact on the Moroccan political system of the political and legal reforms instituted since the end of the 1980s. A new wave of democratisation pushed the regime to adapt by pursuing some legal reforms and allowing women to enter elected institutions via a quota, first used in the first elections of the reign of King Mohammed VI in 2002. The reformist trend gained momentum with the 2011 constitution, which explicitly stipulated the principle of gender parity, and with the expansion of dedicated seats for women in the laws governing the House of Representatives in the wake of the protest movement in 2011. The paper also highlights the essential role played by the Moroccan women's movement to raise women's issues in the public sphere, especially the issue of political empowerment, whether by advocating for a quota in 2002 or championing this demand in memorandums submitted in the midst of the Arab and Moroccan movements of 2011.

Despite the importance of policies that accompanied the women's quota, many international observers and researchers questioned the nature of these reforms. Observing that they were merely democratic on their face, they argued that hybrid regimes seek to use such reforms to burnish their appearance without anchoring the rules for political empowerment in solid democratic foundations. The symbolic nature of female representation seems to bear out this thesis. Despite the increasing numbers of women elected to the House of Representatives since the adoption of the quota in the 2002 elections, and following the constitutional, political, and legal reforms of 2011, these steps did not lead to genuine political empowerment so much as introduce a new glass ceiling that made it more difficult for women to run and win seats outside the national list reserved for women; the same pattern holds for local electoral lists. Indeed, the quota system was transformed from a mechanism to enhance women's political empowerment and representation in parliament into a tool for social reproduction and a means of reinforcing party patronage and clientelism.

## About the Author

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