Election Watch for the Digital Age

★ Morocco

Preelection assessment

General elections set for September 2021

Moroccans will head to the polls in September to vote in legislative, municipal, and regional elections. This marks the third general election since the 2011 constitutional reforms, which require the king to name a prime minister from the largest party in Parliament, among other constitutional changes. Many major policy decisions and key cabinet positions remain under the purview of King Mohammed VI. The Justice and Development Party (PJD) has led a fragile coalition since the 2011 elections. Other parties include the center-right Istiqlal Party, the center-left Socialist Union of Popular Forces, and several parties aligned to the royal palace. Despite the 2011 reforms, the palace has often intervened to weaken the PJD, its coalition, and its ability to govern.

Among the key issues in the election are the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the related economic crisis, and the recent decision to normalize relations with Israel. Nonetheless, the perceived ineffectiveness of elected officials has contributed to a strong sense of apathy among voters; turnout in the 2016 election reached a record low. Grassroots activism, such as the *Hirak Rif* movement against inequality that began in the Rif region, has been met with harsh repression of free expression and civic organizing online and offline. Space for independent media has also shrunk in recent years, and many outlets have been shuttered by harsh licensing laws and advertising restrictions. Surveillance, arrests, and pressure on journalists has deepened self-censorship, especially when reporting on protests, corruption, the monarchy, and other politically sensitive issues.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of the election:

- **Online content manipulation:** Morocco's online information environment is distorted by influential actors, sometimes through surreptitious means. Facebook's 2021 report on coordinated inauthentic behavior noted the removal of 385 accounts, 6 pages, and 40 Instagram accounts that were used to comment on progovernment stories from various outlets. The accounts criticized popular dissidents, domestic human rights organizations, and people who voiced opposition to the king. They also praised the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many news outlets are either tied to the government or political elites, who informally pressure advertisers to financially support outlets that promote their interests and box out those that are more critical of the government or royal family. The proliferation of progovernment information online has led to a biased media environment that may impact how voters obtain information online ahead of the elections.
- **Harassment of journalists and critics:** Journalists, activists, and critics of the royal family are frequently harassed and intimidated on social media. In 2020, online news outlets with close ties to government intelligence services published a smear campaign about Soulaiman

Raissouni, a journalist and newspaper editor, who was later arrested. In 2017, Nasser Zefzafi, a prominent leader of the *Hirak Rif* movement who is currently serving a 20-year prison sentence for his involvement in the protests, was the subject of defamatory articles published by progovernment news sites. This atmosphere of intimidation and harassment could impact independent outlets and journalists ahead of the elections.

Morocco has a score of 42 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects Morocco's multiparty electoral system and a trend of censorship and restrictions on media freedom. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2021*, with a score of 37 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties and **Partly Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 52 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Morocco country reports in *Freedom in the World* and *Freedom on the Net*.