

# Dutch judge Moroccan elections

## Report

**RABAT | Journalist Tijdo van der Zee joined a group of European observers last week during their inspection of the Moroccan elections. He wrote an article for *The Times*, giving our readers an insight into the election process.**

By Tijdo van der Zee

The ballot boxes were made of transparent plexiglass to show they had not been secretly stuffed with filled-out ballot papers before the elections. Yes, Mohammed VI and his government organised the Moroccan parliamentary elections well. He should be credited for that. But the question is whether they can be called successful.

Last Friday, 33 political parties competed for 325 seats in the Moroccan parliament. Morocco is widely seen as one of the best governed and most democratic countries on the African continent. Since King Mohammed VI rose to power Morocco has seen great improvements. Tourism is booming. Roads have been built and seaports have been dug. Above all, human rights have improved. Women now have the right to divorce and keep child custody. And a separate voting list ensures a ten percent share of parliamentary seats go to women. Mohammed VI also gave Berbers more rights. Notwithstanding these improvements, Morocco's historic record on democracy and human rights is not so rosy. Dissidents have been imprisoned and tortured in past years and politicians were, and may still be, heavily corrupt. So, not completely confident about the fairness of the game, 3000 Moroccans, united in the *Collectif Associatif pour l'Observation des Elections*, decided to follow the elections critically. Mohammed VI, enlightened king, gave them full access to the voting offices.

Among the 3000 observers were about thirty European Moroccan migrants. One of them was PvdA parliamentarian Khadija Arib. She decided

to observe a voting office in the conservative town of Salé, a neighbouring city of the capital Rabat.

Salé is the home base of sheikh Abdessalam Yassine and his daughter Nadia. They run a movement called Al Adl wa al Ihsan that strives for the introduction of Sharia, Islamic law, in Morocco. The Yassines boycotted the elections. But that does not mean that they are operating in the margins. Instead, Al Adl has a great share of followers, notably among the many poor Moroccans.

It is in Salé where one could suspect irregularities. But nothing really spectacular happened. Arib says: "The gender ratio is about two to one, with women being the latter. That concerns me a little bit. Apart from this, I have to confess that I find it rather dull to stand here all day long."

At 13:40 the chairman of the voting office in Salé shows the turnout, 115 out of 833 registered voters. Only fourteen percent. With five hours to go, it is not likely that more than half of the list has actually voted. It seems that here lies the main problem. "Yes indeed," says the Dutch Moroccan observer Amin Mohammed. "The elections will be fair, I don't doubt that. But consider this example. I witnessed a counting today with a turnout of 38 percent. But 36 of the 157 ballot papers were handed in blank. People have been pushed heavily by the government to vote, but they don't know who to vote for. So they choose randomly or nothing at all. That undermines the legitimacy of our parliament and our democratic system."

Perhaps the King believes Morocco can't cope with the difficulties of life without him. And perhaps he is right. But it could also be that the King himself is part of the problem. It is the King who modernised the country. People are grateful for that. But Moroccans are not fooled by transparent ballot boxes. They know that real democracy begins when King Mohammed VI hands over power to the parliament, and thus to the people.

Only then, maybe, people will voluntarily fill the ballot boxes again.