

Outlets of expression and activism in Morocco

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

The Miami Plage Beach Club in Casablanca is packed with young Moroccans swimming, shooting pool, and enjoying the weather. But one small group of young men and women is hard at work. They are working for the association Casa Fleur. It's a civil society organization that runs summer camps for children from underprivileged neighborhoods that have seen its share of crime and radicalism.

Leila Wadda is 25 years old and a counselor with Casa Fleur. She received her Master's in social work and does not consider herself political.

"Personally, I don't know anyone who is involved in politics either between my friends or the people I know. I am not interested in politics because I can see that I can do nothing. I vote. It's the only relation I have with politics."

She says she votes because it's her right but she is in the minority. More than half of Morocco's population is under 30. The youth vote could be a powerful force but only 30% to 40% tend to vote and only 1% to 2% engage in political organizations.

"I think the best way to make a change is to work in the civil society rather than to become a part of the political party or to engage in politics. You would just find yourself in a busy situation."

She is not alone in this belief. Her friends and other counselors at the camp argue that despite the relative level of political freedom in the country, politics and political parties in Morocco are not addressing the needs of youth such as jobs, education or health care. Instead they believe that civil society associations that focus on social rather than political aims can make a difference for them and the country as a whole.

Zela Abbidine Zezdine is 21 years old and works in the camp as a counselor and a magician. He has been a camper and student in the association since it started in 1994.

"Everyone in my family is a member of an association and even my kids would be part of an association. I think that a person who is just studying and going to a job and not belonging to any association is not an active member in the society. If you want to make change in society, you have to work in civil society."

Morocco's king Mohammed VI has encouraged the growth of associations doing social and development work since his coronation in 1999. Many view it as a tactic to fend off pressure for deeper political reform. Despite the fact that Morocco has a veneer of democracy, it's still an absolute monarchy. The king appoints the prime minister and the council of ministers so the parliament doesn't have a lot of room to maneuver.

Aziz Darmoumi is 27 and is Secretary General of the Youth Committee of the Popular Movement or MP. It's one of the leading political parties in the country.

He says that for decades the party elites have held on to their positions and they haven't made space for young people to climb the party ranks. He also says the parties simply haven't delivered for young people.

"Young people think that when the government does not need to employ them and doesn't find jobs for them, why get involved in politics or get engaged with political parties? They do nothing to get us jobs and so on."

Abdel-Rahim Al-Manar Slimi is a professor of political science at Mohammed V University in Rabat. He says the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) is one of the few political parties that has an effective strategy to reach young people.

"PJD used to have 640 associations. Now they reach 1000 associations. When you work in a society, mainly you work with young people. It's a way to recruit young people. For example, the Socialist Party in the past used to organize campaigns and it was a way to recruit young people."

Given that young people prefer to do social and development work through associations, these civil society organizations can serve as stocking horses for political parties like the PJD.

Like in much of the Arab world today, Morocco's Socialist Party has lost its luster and the Islamist party is gaining strength. While the PJD claims to be a moderate Islamist party, not everyone is exactly comfortable with the notion of them gaining power or spreading their message. In the past, they espoused radical views and policies.

Lahcen Haddad is a professor and consultant to a number of civil society organizations.

"I think that there are other parties which have been concerned about this. I think they are moving in and they are trying to get in with the young population and then try to recruit them."

The success of the Islamist PJD in attracting young people has spurred other secular parties to focus more on youth outreach. They are turning to social media and creating associations to appeal to civic-minded youth.

But Haddad points out that if political parties whether it's the PAM or the PJD don't truly embrace young people, give them authority and show them results, the new recruits might not stick around.

"I think there is a danger of losing those young people if you don't know what to do with them. I can guarantee you. I mean I can get 100,000 young people recruited for a political party but what am I going to give them to do? What are the structures that I need to give them? How will they function? How will they feel that they are significant? That's the challenge. I don't think it's difficult to recruit young people, it's difficult to keep them once you recruit."

—Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad