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Marrakech female mayor vows to tackle corruption, poverty Morocco's only female mayor hits back at rivals



The election of Fatima Azzahra al-Mansouri this year to the top of local position is a rare event in the Arab world (File)

Marrakech, MOROCCO (Reuters)

Morocco's only female mayor is hitting back at political opponents trying to unseat her, vowing to tackle corruption and poverty in Marrakech where a tourism boom is running out of steam.

Fatima Azzahra al-Mansouri's election this year to the top of local government is a rare event in the Arab world, where Islamic tradition often confers fewer rights and freedoms on women than men.

Mansouri replaced veteran mayor Omar Jazouli after the June 12 vote, but an opponent complained of voting irregularities and a court declared the election invalid.

More women in office

An appeal court overturned that decision this month and Morocco's supreme court is due to issue a final ruling soon.

Morocco's government has bolstered women's rights in marriage despite opposition from Islamist groups and appointed some female junior ministers. New quotas propelled more women into office in June local elections.

"Women have a lot to prove so they have a big capacity for work... We are talking about 50 percent of a country's talent, so why deny ourselves this great potential?" Mansouri, 33, said in an interview.

Mansouri, the second female mayor in the north African country's history, took office as the frenetic hotel building that transformed Marrakech into a mass tourism destination was cooling due to the global financial crisis.

"Marrakech had become a fashion phenomenon and with the international crisis we realized this was declining," she said. "If we want to continue being an attractive city, we need to raise living standards for Marrakech's people."

She is pledging to improve life for the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods who came to Marrakech in recent decades to escape rural droughts and earn tourist dollars. Many built makeshift homes without running water, power or proper drains.

"It's unacceptable for a town that saw such an economic boom to still have such an imbalanced society," she said.

Urban development plan

An urban development plan that sat on the drawing board for the past 10 years would finally be put into effect and the system for granting building permits made quicker and more transparent, helping address official corruption.

"I cannot say who stole and how much they stole -- there are tribunals for that," said Mansouri. "Marrakech has evolved without any urban plan for 10 years. As long as we are in this void, the door is open for abuses."

Development campaigners in Marrakesh say Mansouri is a relative political unknown who studied law in France and has little previous involvement in the city's affairs.

Political rivals say she does not represent change as her father was a senior Marrakech official and an ambassador.

The June vote was the first big test for her Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), which swept the polls nationwide on the promise of an end to the gesture politics and inaction that has left Moroccans with little faith in their representatives.

"Moroccans have gradually lost interest in politics, but civil society has developed through associations," said Mansouri. "Many people wanted to contribute to their nation but could not find a political framework."

Critics say PAM -- brainchild of former interior minister Fouad Ali Himma, a friend of King Mohammed -- is merely a cosmetic facelift for an entrenched elite that aims to grab back the initiative from Morocco's burgeoning civil society movement.

They say PAM could not have achieved such rapid success without widespread vote buying.

"Our campaign was the cleanest in town," said Mansouri, who expects the supreme court to validate her election. "I have confidence in our country's justice."