



THE MOROCCAN EXCEPTION

By Ahmed Charai

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Amid the radical transformations in Tunisia and Egypt and rumblings of change in numerous other Arab countries, one populous Arab country stands out as relatively stable: Morocco. As America struggles to articulate a strategy for engaging Arab peoples in their legitimate aspirations while at the same time maintaining stability in the Arab region, Morocco presents a model worth considering.

Why has Morocco largely been spared the popular angst and mass demonstrations that are becoming the norm across the Arab world? The government is flawed and much work is yet to be done in order to properly bring Morocco into the 21st century. Yet the government is also fundamentally stable. There are several reasons.

The first is a unique aspect of Moroccan political culture that most populous Arab countries cannot easily emulate. In a region in which political legitimacy is hard to come by, Morocco is governed by a monarchy with three centuries of continuous history in the country. The institution of the *Makhzin*, Moroccan Arabic for the kingdom's administrative authority, enjoys historic popularity within the country. It is part of the fabric of Moroccan culture, woven into its music and art as well as its political and civil society institutions. King Muhammad VI himself enjoys immense popularity, particularly among the urban as well as rural poor, who largely perceive him as their champion.

But in his 11-year reign, the young king has not been content to rest on the laurels of his family tradition. To the contrary, he has made strenuous efforts to resist and overturn the dictatorial tendencies of his late father, Hasan II, whose years of rule were popularly known as the "years of lead." Muhammad VI began his rule by relieving the late king's long-serving and unpopular security chief, and replacing him, for the first time, with a civilian. He did so, on the backdrop of the growing strength of the country's Islamist opposition, a menagerie of parties and extra-political movements which unsurprisingly include a local franchise of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Within four years of taking the helm, the king established the first-ever truth and reconciliation commission in the Arab world, aiming redress humanitarian grievances stemming from the excesses of the previous regime. Many victims were compensated for their prior suffering. For the first time in the country's modern history, he invited the political left to join his government in parliament. He held successive parliamentary elections in which Islamists registered unprecedented gains and became an influential component of the legislature. In the most recent parliamentary elections, voting was hailed by the French Daily *Le Monde* as the "Moroccan Exception" to the Arab region's tradition of gerrymandered ballots. Though there are problems with the outcome of the election—26 parties ran candidates, and the outcome is a fractious coalition led by a technocrat prime minister—few dispute its fairness.

Today in Morocco, the streets are relatively free of mass demonstrations for the simple reason that young people have numerous other outlets to register their disapproval of government policies and even the system of government itself. Public debate is widely aired in the country's robust, privately owned media – in which even debates over the power of the king are no longer taboo.

These achievements notwithstanding, the kingdom faces formidable challenges and will continue to rely on American and European support for the foreseeable future. The principal challenge, from which other problems flow, is widespread poverty, the virtual absence of a middle class. The king inherited an economic situation in which poverty, often stark, is the lot of

millions of Moroccans. The country's social deficit in terms of housing, hospital beds, and basic infrastructure is significant. Widespread bureaucratic corruption stokes popular concerns that the government is ill-equipped to address the public's economic needs. This environment has also contributed to the flourishing of illicit industries, such as illegal immigration to Europe and massive drug trafficking; together with the problem of terrorism.

The system that has been put in place by Mohammed VI to address the problem of poverty is based on a partnership approach with civil society institutions. The resources mobilized are considerable, if insufficient to bridge the poverty gap: the Moroccan economy's growth rate has averaged four percent over five years—not unreasonable for a developing country, though inadequate to accommodate the needs of the country's fast-growing population. Urban areas have registered the highest gains. They are even manifest to the naked eye: the king has begun to act on plans to raze the shantytowns and relocate their inhabitants to new public housing. Meanwhile, though rural areas lag behind, new infrastructure projects promise to put a sizable portion of the rural poor to work, through the massive building of roads and highways, ports, rural electrification, and potable water projects for the countryside. The socio-economic impact of these projects will be felt in the intermediate and long term. Meanwhile, however, poverty breeds extremism.

The kingdom's other principal challenge is the rise of political Islam. Since the 1980s and '90s, the discourse of political Islam has tremendously evolved, together with its strategic approach, which has become more pragmatic. Instead of promising the immediate restoration of the Shari'a, the Qur'anic canon, the majority of Islamist parties now claim to adhere to three core concepts: freedom, justice, and development. While not renouncing their religiously retrograde tenets, they have aptly integrated into their discourse the themes of democracy and reforms. Their vision is however unchanged when it comes to the status of women. For this reason in particular, Moroccan government efforts to increase the credibility of elected bodies is further complicated by the Islamist phenomenon. Though Islamists have won only ten percent of voters in the most recent parliamentary elections, the Islamist Justice and Development Party, for example, has exploited splits within other political camps to build a coalition that advances its goals considerably. Islamists still use the conservative backdrop of Moroccan society to press for Shari'ah-oriented social change. For example, Islamists massively mobilized to block the king's "Women's Integration Plan," a series of measures put forth by the government to improve the lot of the country's female population. Mindful of the stakes, the king created an extra-parliamentary commission tasked to advance the plan's agenda. Non-Islamist Moroccan elites feared the project would be buried. The surprise that followed was that the king pressed for the implementation of the plan and won, despite Islamist efforts to defeat it.

Meanwhile, working within the cultural fabric of the country, the King has undertaken to reform religious life more broadly, promoting an open and tolerant form of Islam and fighting intellectual and cultural extremism. This endeavour has included the deployment of female religious "advisors" to many mosques and the reengineering of Islamic education in the kingdom, with the goal of stemming the more virulent forms of Wahhabism—a militant trend that had begun to take root in Morocco in the early eighties when Saudi Arabia and Morocco joined forces against Soviet communism in Afghanistan. Drawing on Morocco's rich heterodox tradition of Islam, the king has also enlisted the country's Sufi leadership – the mystical strand of Islam, so strong in Morocco – to help counter militants.

In this largely stable and benign political environment, a small coalition of fringe players are nonetheless working to rock the system, predominantly from outside the country. Prince Hisham, a relative of the king based in Princeton, New Jersey, appears to espouse an alternative to the monarchy, more along the lines of the Tunisian regime under Bin Ali or the present regime in Syria. Thinking outside the box, he has forged in the past an alliance with Nadia Yassine, scion of the extremist Islamist "Justice and Charity Movement," and declared that Moroccans should "not fear the arrival of the Islamists in power," as if Islamism does not enjoy political power already. Prince Hisham has enlisted a small number of sympathetic journalists to help make his case. It is unfortunate that the prince does not return to Morocco and enter the political fray himself. When he eventually does, he will discover the opportunity to make his case to the population directly, rather than through proxies, and ultimately to further strengthen progress toward free and representative government in Morocco.

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