



MOROCCAN DEMOCRACY AND THE FUTURE OF THE SAHARA

By Ahmed Charai

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Over the past three months, Arab heads of state have responded to mass protests in their respective countries by either fleeing or fighting. Egypt's Mubarak and Tunisia's Bin Ali decided that their positions were untenable and promptly surrendered their rule. Meanwhile in Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, and, most brutally, in Libya, rulers are cracking down hard on domestic unrest to try and maintain their authority the old fashioned way. In all these cases, Arab leaders appear to have ruled out a third option: share power with their people through serious, aggressive reform of the political system.

Until this week, that is—when Moroccan King Muhammad VI made a stunning speech to his people in which he committed to doing just that. His supporters in the country have dubbed the new plan for sweeping constitutional reform “The King’s Revolution,” while skeptics are voicing doubts as to whether his promises will actually be put into effect. While most sectors of Moroccan society responded with enthusiasm to the king’s proposals, some were critical. The radical Islamist group al-Adl wa ‘l-Ihsan, which aims to overthrow the monarchy and establish an Islamist regime, rejected the plan outright. So did a relatively small number of youth protesters. In light of continuing unrest throughout North Africa and the Middle East, the Moroccan leader’s novel approach bears examining. What has he really offered? What are the chances he will deliver? What are the implications for the rest of the region? Each question is further complicated by the long-simmering conflict between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara. The tension over that disputed desert land has stymied political and economic progress in both countries for the past three decades—and any serious political initiative by the king must somehow address the Sahara’s future.

The 47-year-old monarch announced his new plan on national television this past Wednesday. Flanked by his brother and son, he called for a new constitution that would reduce his own authority vis a vis the elected parliament, effect a separation of powers, enshrine individual liberties and human rights, and distribute governance more evenly over the country. According to the plan, the judiciary, currently under the control of the executive branch, would be elevated to the status of an independent power. An elected prime minister—no longer appointed by the king—would assume control over most aspects of the executive branch of government. New amendments would enshrine individual rights and gender equality as well as make the Berber mother tongue of Amazigh an official language alongside Arabic. Finally, for the first time, regional elected bodies would supersede appointed governors as the principal decision-makers in regional affairs.

The credibility of these commitments may be assessed in three ways: first, in terms of the monarchy’s track record on implementing reform; second, whether the Moroccan people themselves appear to believe the king will make good on his promises; and third, whether the “regionalization” of elected power will apply equally to the Sahara, and what that would mean for the longstanding conflict.

First, as to the track record, since assuming the throne in 1999 King Muhammad VI has indeed made substantial changes in the way the country is governed. He persuaded opposition parties to return from exile and play a robust role in parliamentary politics and government. He built a kingdom-wide network of civil society institutions to foster civic leadership, empower women, and assist the poor. He also created the Arab world’s first-ever truth and reconciliation commission to help redress the people’s grievances against the brutality of his father’s regime. Though far from ideal, the commission delivered official acknowledgment of the monarchy’s historic brutality as well as compensation to victims for their suffering. The kingdom subsequently won accolades from international human rights organizations for bolstering individual liberties. On the other hand, critics of the king have rightly observed that the past few years have seen a reversal of key reforms, particularly in the

wake of the monarchy's tough counter-terrorist measures. So on balance, the king deserves a passing grade for his track record on reform, even if he did not pass with flying colors.

Second, in terms of the Moroccan people's trust in the king's proposal, it appears to be relatively strong. While some Islamist groups rejected the speech, key members of the elected opposition in parliament have praised it as taking into account their demands for constitutional reform. As for the country's youth, popular unrest has markedly ebbed in the wake of the king's address. On the streets of Casablanca and Rabat, fewer people are taking to the streets—and there are virtually no calls for the ouster of the king. This degree of civil peace is unique among the Arab world's populous countries today.

Third, perhaps the lynchpin of the plan's credibility and success, is the question of the interplay between the proposed political reforms and the Sahara conflict. Since 2007 the Moroccan government has offered autonomy to the people of the Sahara as a compromise to the Algerian demand of a separate Saharan state. As people who follow the Saharan conflict know, a relatively small number of Saharans live in refugee camps on Algerian soil controlled by the Polisario militia, which aspires to control all Saharan territory. But now the king's reform agenda appears to be overtaking political deliberations with Algeria and the Polisario at the UN. Consider the implication, after all, of the king's new plan to supersede the authority of appointed governors by empowering elected regional councils. An elected council in Morocco's Saharan region would amount, in effect, to Saharan autonomy—with or without a settlement between Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario. This prospect underscores that the king's new plan poses geopolitical as well as a domestic risks to the monarchy. It will be extremely difficult for the king to take such risks unless a peace settlement with Algeria is achieved at the UN. Such a settlement, in turn, requires American and European support.

The possibility of sweeping reform in Morocco, in any event, also raises the question of broader implications across North Africa and the Middle East. Would the king's plan provide a new model for autocrats to follow in other countries? Would it raise expectations among Arab youth outside Morocco that their leaders, too, will promise similar reforms?

The answer to these questions will vary dramatically from country to country. In Bahrain, for example, the impact of the Moroccan king's speech will likely be to embolden protestors to demand similar commitments from their own king. The same may be true in the kingdom of Jordan. Nor will the loosening of autocracy in Morocco serve to reduce seething tensions inside military republics such as Algeria, Syria, and Yemen, to say nothing of Libya. But for heads of state in each of these countries, the Moroccan initiative may also provide a viable alternative to fighting or fleeing. It is the choice that every leader should make: to harness his formidable powers in the service of his people—whatever the risk, whatever the outcome.

Editor's Note: For background on the Western Sahara issue, see:

A Note on the Western Sahara, by Harvey Sicherman, E-Notes, April 2010

<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201004.sicherman.westernsahara.html>

Struggle in the Sandbox: The Western Sahara and the International Community, by Michael Radu, E-Notes, September 2007

<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200709.radu.sandboxwesternsahara.html>

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