



Arab Spring, Moroccan Style

ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING ASPECTS OF THE political upheaval that has cascaded back and forth across the Middle East and North Africa over the last half-year has been the fact that it largely bypassed Morocco, a country which suffers from many of the same underlying ills, which drove the protests elsewhere – corruption, poverty, unemployment, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small stratum, the absence of real democracy and closed horizons for its large, youthful population.

To be sure, a loose amalgamation of youthful activists, organizations and parties demanding fundamental reforms did arise, and security forces occasionally employed a heavy hand in repressing demonstrations. But the protests never reached a critical mass, while the Moroccan authorities, i.e. the Royal Palace, were proactive in their response. They increased state subsidies on basic goods, raised salaries for civil servants and promised a constitutional overhaul.

The upshot was that on July 1, 98.5 percent of Moroccan voters (73 percent of those eligible) endorsed a new constitution designed to modernize Moroccan political life while maintaining the prerogatives of the ruling Alouite monarchy. The absence of upheaval and the veneer of reform measures further strengthened Morocco's favorable image in the West, one of a country characterized by a benevolent mix of tradition and modernity, authenticity with openness to foreign cultures, political stability and evolution towards greater pluralism. This includes an Islamist current, as well as one which seeks to enhance the status of women.

Can one speak of Moroccan exceptionalism? Is there a secret to Morocco's ability to dodge the shock waves roiling the region? To be sure, Morocco possesses some distinct assets: a political and societal center within a distinct geographical core stretching back more than 1,200 years; a ruling dynasty whose legitimacy is based on direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad; religious homogeneity; and a distinct material and popular culture, religious practice, and linguistic configuration, much of which stems from Morocco's Berber population. However, if anything, Tunisia and Egypt possess an even greater degree of cohesion, which did not prevent the latest revolutions.

Was it the legitimacy provided by the monarchical institution that explains the lack of a massive popular uprising? To even suggest so would have been ridiculed a generation ago. But by the 1990s, Middle East monarchies began to be viewed in a more favorable light, a resilient institution that often provided vital social cohesion in times of rapid change. Moreover, the last years of the late King Hassan's 38-year reign, which ended in his death in 1999, were marked by what he called "homeopathic democracy" – measured, incremental steps at political liberalization. However numbingly slow, it resulted in the ending of some of Morocco's most notorious human-rights abuses, an expansion of the space for civil society organizations, and an agreement with the historic opposition political parties to re-enter the political game.

Liberal circles hoped that Hassan's son and successor, Muhammad VI, would move towards establishing a Spanish-style constitutional monarchy, à la King Juan Carlos. Although this was not in the cards, he made Morocco a significantly more relaxed place, politically, socially and culturally, in sharp contrast with the political stagnation and retrogression which had marked the Tunisian and Egyptian political landscapes and set the stage for their 2011 revolutions.

Part of Muhammad VI's ruling formula was to allow a certain degree of Islamist political activity. Another was to balance it by strengthening the country's liberal current. One centerpiece of his approach was the adoption of a new family law, which brought women significantly closer to legal equality with men. Another was a truth and reconciliation commission to acknowledge the abuses committed by his father's minions. A third was the partial support of the Amazigh (Berber) culture movement. Real power in the kingdom, however, stayed in the hands of the palace and its affiliate circles, while parliament remained emasculated and political parties mainly competed for the patronage the palace was willing to bestow. Moreover, in more recent years, the country regressed in terms of press freedom and human rights, while economically, growth rates were insufficient for reducing the high rate of unemployment and the rate of illiteracy remained over 40 percent.

The new Moroccan constitution, which was drawn up by a cross-section of experts appointed by the palace, contains a number of potentially meaningful innovations. Ensuring human rights, gender equality and a genuinely independent judiciary are considered core values. Tamazight (Berber), spoken by up to 40 percent of the country's population, is recognized as an official language of the state, alongside Arabic – a historic achievement for the Berber movement. The constitution even acknowledged the Jewish contribution to Morocco's national identity.

The prime minister will now be the head of the political party that receives the most votes, and his powers and that of the parliament are somewhat enhanced. However, preponderant power remains in the hands of the king who, while no longer defined as "sacred," remains the Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), both the religious and political head of the state, symbol of the nation's unity, guarantor of the state's existence, supreme arbiter between institutions, and personally beyond reproach.

In short, Morocco's new constitution reflects the country's dual, and often contradictory nature – a hereditary, Islamic-based absolute monarchy, ruling over a modernizing, multicultural and politically pluralist social and political order. Mohammad VI has bought further time with his latest measures, and Moroccan society as a whole does not appear ready to go to the barricades. But staying ahead of the rising curve of demands for real reform will demand much skill and wisdom from the country's political elite, beginning with the king himself. ●

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