



Volume 5, Number 15

August 10, 2011

Moroccan Reform: The Royal Will and Popular Protests

Samir Ben-Layashi

Morocco has been conspicuously absent from the list of Arab regimes threatened by popular protests during the last seven months. To be sure, there has been organized, sustained activity there, generated by a loose amalgamation known as the February 20 Movement. While not achieving a critical mass, they did compel the authorities to take proactive measures, with King Mohammed VI promising, in March, to institute comprehensive reforms through the promulgation of a new constitution. On June 17, he delivered a televised speech to the nation outlining the new measures to be included in the constitution, which would be submitted to the population for approval on 1 July. In the speech's aftermath, thousands of youth spontaneously flooded the streets in support of the king and his promises. And indeed, the vote was exactly what the authorities desired: according to official figures, 98.5 percent of participating voters (73 percent of 15 million adult Moroccans) endorsed the new constitution, providing official legitimacy to the Palace-directed reform process.

In both its politically sophisticated rhetoric and ultimate absence of clarity, the 17 June speech was reminiscent of the kinds of speeches that the king's late father, King Hassan II, was prone to delivering in the 1980s-90s. As with numerous referendums engineered by Hassan, King Mohammed's 17 June speech invited all Moroccans to vote "Yes" in the referendum. The publicly demonstrated fervor in support of the King's request was matched by members of parliament, deputies, governors, *walis* and *qayids*, as well as party leaders from the majority and opposition alike.

Although the public might ultimately benefit from a more independent posture, it is not in the interest of the parliamentary parties to vote against the King's reforms. Hence, the Parliament unanimously agreed that the new constitution would benefit all Moroccans and that voting "Yes" was a "national duty." Ironically, even the main opposition Islamist party, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD), made it clear that it would vote in favor of the new constitution. On the morning after the King's speech, Abdellah Benkirane, the party's secretary-general, said on the national French radio station *RFI*:

"The constitution is not against the participation of the Islamists in Moroccan political life; on the contrary. So why should we be against? There are, of course, a few things [in the new constitution] that we don't agree with and we'll do our best to have them changed, like the issue of parity between men and women, which we believe is anti-democratic, since equality between people should be based on meritocracy and not on sex or gender differences."

In his speech elaborating on the new constitution's provisions, the King emphasized two particular reform measures with regard to the political system, and two issues related to Moroccan identity. The first measure requires the King to appoint as prime minister the leader of the largest party in Parliament; the second pertains to increasing the powers of Parliament and strengthening the independence of the judiciary. Nonetheless, he retains his privileged status as both the spiritual and political head of the Moroccan polity, which is defined as an Islamic state, leaving the February 20 Movement's expressed desire for popular sovereignty, a western-style constitutional monarchy, and freedom of conscience out of reach.

Regarding the issue of Moroccan national identity, the new constitution defined it more broadly than in the past: the country's three components, it declared, were Arab, Amazigh (Berber), and Hassanian-Saharan (emphasizing Morocco's claim to the disputed territory of Western Sahara). The new constitution's recognition of Tamazight (the mother tongue of about 50 percent of Moroccans) as an official language, alongside Arabic, is an unprecedented development in the Arab world. It is also an historic achievement for the Berber movement, although implementation will undoubtedly pose a new set of issues. In another first, it even acknowledged the "Hebraic" contribution to the formation of the Moroccan personality, along with Andalusian, African and Mediterranean influences.

Although identity issues are fundamental to the political and intellectual discourse in Morocco, by making them the core of the royal speech and the new constitution, the monarchy seems to have sidestepped the real purpose of the February 20 Movement's demonstrations. At such a sensitive time, the theoretical discussion of Moroccan identity made the royal speech sound more like a manifesto of idealism and good will, rather than a starting point for effecting concrete change in the every day lives of ordinary Moroccans. Like the reforms of the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s, the latest constitutional measures are of the top-down variety, determined by the Palace. The power imbalance between the Moroccan political-economic ruling elites and the public at large remains enormous.

What the young protesters of the February 20 Movement demand is not an intellectual discussion on identity. The slogans of the protesters in Casablanca, Rabat, Fez, Meknes, and other smaller cities, had nothing to do with an identity crisis. And although Amazigh flags were raised — it was a good opportunity for Amazigh activists to draw attention to their cause — the identity problem is not the cause that some protesters declared themselves willing to die for. The most salient slogans pertained to combating corruption; creating jobs, raising the minimum wage and introducing unemployment benefits; improving healthcare; expanding pensions and social security benefits for everyone and not only for state functionaries; building housing for young people, so they can leave their parents' homes and build lives of their own; and expanding higher education to make it available to everyone and not only those who can pay for the *Grandes Ecoles* in Morocco and France.

A recurrent issue is the country's poor healthcare system and the deplorable conditions of public hospitals where people go to die, rather than cure their maladies. Many Moroccans cannot afford care at private hospitals and clinics.

Instead of dealing with the real problems, the royal speech and new constitution focused on abstract issues of identity and symbols of power, e.g. that "the king will remain the Commander of the Faithful." Moroccan political culture has no problem with viewing the King as "God's deputy on earth." In general, Moroccans have nothing against this symbolism, and know it is a part of the political game. What they increasingly cannot accept is that an emphasis on political and religious symbolism comes at the expense of addressing concrete fundamental grievances. No one underestimates the power of symbols. The "Facebook generation" knows better than anyone else the power of the virtual, and by the same token, they know that for the virtual to become real, symbols must be translated into tangible actions.

Symbols are very important for every nation. Modernity has not managed to erode this inner human need; on the contrary, it consolidated it. But a nation that lives only on symbols is condemned to perpetual second-class status.

Samir Ben-Layashi is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of History in Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. He grew up in Meknes, Morocco.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website <http://www.dayan.tau.ac.il>.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."