

The Arab Spring and Morocco's Reforms: Heading for an Overhaul or an Overthrow?

Reverberations from the Arab Spring of 2011 continue to rock the Middle East. Violent protests and civil conflict in Egypt and Syria appear in headlines daily. Yet Morocco appears to have escaped the Arab Spring relatively unscathed. The debate over its exceptionalism continues: some tout it as a model for democratic transition while others say its real spring is yet to come (Tawil and "Interview with Sally Shelton-Colby").

Political, social, and economic reforms enacted in Morocco as a result of the Arab Spring sufficiently satisfied protestors at the time. Continued reforms will be enough to keep Moroccans from overthrowing their government and will assist a gradual transition to more political, social, and economic rights for Moroccans. While Morocco faces massive economic challenges that threaten future reforms, if Morocco's government continues to hold itself accountable to the Moroccan people and avoids economic disaster, then Morocco will continue its gradual overhaul.

The King and His People

King Mohammed VI rules Morocco's constitutional monarchy. He came to power in 1999, but his family has ruled Morocco since 1664. Claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammed, he uses his religious ties to legitimize his immense political power. Some Moroccans even view him as unimpeachable. Professor Mohamed Daadaoui of Oklahoma City University told the BBC that some Moroccans "believe that the monarch has a special gift or blessing and they feel that they have some psychological relationship with the king" (Lewis).

Yet new reforms may be changing the relationship between the king and his people. In the 2011 Moroccan Constitution, Article 41 maintains the king's status as Commander of the Faithful, but ensures "the free exercise of religion." Article 42 spells out his political authority as "chief of state." Paul Silverstein at the Middle East Research and Information Project points out the importance of "de-linking" these two roles as a step toward separation of religion and government (Silverstein). With this de-linkage of the king's political power and religious significance, his unimpeachability is ending. Although Morocco's new constitution still defines it as an Islamic state, the de-linkage of the king's roles in religion and politics marks the beginning of the end for his religion-based legitimacy.

Party Politics

The king has shown remarkable responsiveness to civil discontent, holding a constitutional referendum just months after Morocco's Arab Spring protests, the February 20th Movement, to make key political and social changes. By contrast, other North African leaders responded with violence or lack of reforms. Morocco's peaceful protests and the king's responsive reforms are exceptional in the Arab Spring.

Approved in the summer of 2011, the new Moroccan Constitution requires the king to name a prime minister from the largest party in Parliament and give a number of other rights to Parliament that previously belonged to the king. With over 70% voter turnout on the referendum, 98% voted yes, as reported by the Moroccan government (Labott). In October 2011, Moroccans voted in the Justice and Development Party (PJD), a moderate Islamist party. The king accordingly named its leader Abdelilah Benkirane prime minister. The PJD has been working with the king on more reforms, and its moderate approach is popular-- it was extremely successful in partial elections in March 2013. Although the king still exercises a great deal of control over what gets done, the PJD and other reformers are making progress.

Despite widespread support for these reforms, not all are happy with them. The leader of the banned Justice and Charity movement, Fathallah Arenalane, criticizes policies and practices of the monarchy and its rampant corruption (Bellaouali). Moroccan protestors echo this frustration. In my interview with her, Ambassador Sally Shelton-Colby, who monitored elections with the National Democratic Institute, estimated that less than 35% of Moroccans voted in the 2011 parliamentary elections, and stressed the high number of ballots with black X's or swear words from voters who do not trust Morocco's election process ("Interview with Sally Shelton-Colby"). But unlike protestors in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, Moroccans did not try to overthrow their government.

Civil Society and Freedom of Speech

Morocco's exceptionalism comes partly from its freedom of speech and active civil society that allow citizens to express their opinions without needing to overthrow the government. Kristina Kausch from the European think tank Fride describes Moroccan civil society as "among the most diverse and vibrant in the region" (Kausch). An active civil society allows people to voice their opinions and even force the government to respond.

The recent event of "#DanielGate" offers a case study of popular dissent and governmental response in Morocco. In late July, King Mohammed VI pardoned 48 Spanish prisoners including convicted pedophile Daniel Galvan, who had been sentenced to 30 years. Moroccans protested using social media, candlelight vigils, and demonstrations. The king rescinded Galvan's pardon. In this case, the king did something Moroccans disagreed with; they protested, and he accommodated their basic demands. When people can protest on the streets and the government agrees to their most important demands, then they are unlikely to overthrow their government. As long as the king responds to the demands of Moroccans, they will feel empowered and not want to overthrow the government.

Social Reforms

Civil and social reform reflect the power of Morocco's civil society. In 2004, the king reformed the Moroccan family code (mudawwana) in a landmark move for women's rights. In April 2012, the king of Morocco officially launched the Medical Assistance Plan (RAMED) with the goal of improving healthcare for the poor. This improvement in healthcare responded to protestors' demands in February

2011. Though many citizens are still not satisfied, government officials report an increase in spending on medication and say they are "heading in the right direction" (Ali).

Economics

The biggest challenge to the king's authority will be the economy. Like many economies of Arab Spring countries and throughout the Middle East, Morocco's economy is not growing fast enough to absorb its demographic growth. Economic growth has been slowing since the 2008 recession, and the persistent economic woes of Europe have been and will continue to exacerbate this slow down.

Despite the decreasing growth, the government has begun making some difficult reforms. Estimates suggest that 70% of subsidies go to the wealthiest 20% of the population. The International Monetary Fund has demanded that Morocco cut its subsidies in order to receive further help from the IMF. Recently the government reduced food and fuel subsidies to fulfill the IMF's requirement for a two-year Precautionary Liquidity Line of \$6.2 billion (Morocco World News). Unfortunately, this led to the defection of the Istiqlal party from the ruling coalition (Reuters). Though their defection could further limit the power of parliament, the government's decision to push through subsidy reform is a good sign for the economy. Through reforms to simplify bureaucratic processes and protect minority shareholders, Morocco improved by 21 places from 2011 to 2012 in the global rankings of ease of doing business (Doing Business). However, a slow economy and stagnating job market could very well lead to massive protests like those in Tunisia and Egypt unless the government takes steps to boost economic growth and job creation.

A recent report from the Institute of International Finance suggests optimism for Morocco's economic future. The report forecasts an acceleration in growth from 2.8% in 2012 to 4.4% in 2013 due to increased agricultural output, though nonagricultural growth will slow from 4.2% to 2.7% largely because of a weak Eurozone. However, if the Eurozone continues its trajectory of recovery, Morocco will benefit. The report places urban unemployment at 13.7%, an improvement but still high. The report comes to the familiar conclusion that "Deeper structural reforms are needed to achieve sustainable higher growth to reduce unemployment and poverty" (Irradian). The economists' proposed reforms, like subsidy reform, are necessary but difficult. The recent push-through of subsidy reforms is encouraging for further economic reform, though discouraging for longer-term political reform. The key will be balance.

Moroccans are achieving significant reforms, but they are not always getting to the core issues. So far, the king's incrementalism has made some superficial and some sincere reforms and saved his government from the overthrows faced by leaders in neighboring states. Moroccans may be off the streets for now, but they are still demanding deep reforms. If the king can balance political power, social issues, and economic health while respecting democratic reforms made in 2011, Morocco will continue on its path of increased political, social, and economic well-being for its citizens. Morocco will not soon follow England and Spain toward true constitutional monarchy, but by listening to the voices of the people it will democratize. Unlike the overthrow of Egypt's republic or the lack of reform in Bahrain's monarchy, Morocco is set for a gradual overhaul.

Works Cited

- Ali, Siham. "Moroccans Assess RAMEL Success." *Magharebia*. United States Africa Command, 21 Mar. 2013. Web. 8 July 2013.
- Bellaouali, Smail. "AP Interview: Morocco's Largest Islamist Opposition Movement Warns of Unrest without Reform." *Fox News*. FOX News Network, 5 Feb. 2013. Web. 28 Aug. 2013.
- Doing Business. "Doing Business 2012 - Doing Business in a More Transparent World - World Bank Group." *Doing Business: Measuring Business Regulations*. The World Bank Group, 20 Oct. 2011. Web. 28 Aug. 2013.
- "Interview with Sally Shelton-Colby." Telephone interview. 19 Aug. 2013.
- Iradian, Garbis. "Challenges of Achieving Higher Growth." *Institute of International Finance*. Institute of International Finance, 15 Aug. 2013. Web. 16 Aug. 2013.
- Kausch, Kristina. "Morocco: Negotiating Change with the Makhzen." *FRIDE: A European Think Tank for Global Action*. FRIDE, 14 Mar. 2008. Web. 17 July 2013.
- Labott, Elise, and Aida Alami. "Morocco Approves Constitutional Reforms." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 01 July 2011. Web. 28 Aug. 2013.
- Lewis, Aidan. "Why Has Morocco's King Survived the Arab Spring?" *BBC News*. BBC, 24 Nov. 2011. Web. 15 July 2013.
- Morocco World News. "IMF Confirms 6.2 Billion USD Precautionary Liquidity Line for Morocco." *Morocco World News RSS*. Morocco World News, 1 Aug. 2013. Web. 28 Aug. 2013.
- Reuters. "Morocco's Islamists Set for Power Deal with Center Right." *Voice of America*. Voice of America, 30 July 2013. Web. 28 Aug. 2013.
- Silverstein, Paul. "Weighing Morocco's New Constitution." *Middle East Research and Information Project*. Middle East Research and Information Project, 5 July 2011. Web. 18 July 2013.
- Tawil, Camille. "Morocco's Stability in the Wake of the Arab Spring." *Combating Terrorism Center*. United States Military Academy at West Point, 23 May 2013. Web. 15 July 2013.
- The World Bank Group. "Morocco, Most Improved Economy, Creates Business-Friendly Environment." *Investment Climate*. The World Bank Group, 2012. Web. 28 Aug. 2013.