A Moroccan Exception?

David Pollock

Alone among all Arab countries, Morocco has since early 2011 witnessed mass protests that resulted in the peaceful, democratic election of an Islamist party to head the government—followed by two years of calm. Impressive though often overlooked, this rare success story from the Arab Spring is occasionally invoked as a possible source of emulation by other Arab or predominantly Muslim states. In reality, however, Morocco's situation is so unusual that it probably cannot serve as a model for any other country, even among the other remaining Arab monarchies.

Yet Morocco's very exceptionalism, especially in a region marked by either violent instability or severe repression, or both, make it a special case worthy of significant attention and encouragement. Indeed Morocco, often neglected in the troubled aftermath of the Arab Spring, is actually among its most interesting countries—precisely because it is now so quiet, after a few months of massive demonstrations more than two years ago. The case for this is all the more convincing because of the country's objectively important attributes: a strategic location between the western Mediterranean and the North African Sahel; a relatively large population, approaching 35 million within the next year or two; and an all-too-singular penchant for close economic, political, and security relations with both Europe and the United States.

Two major factors largely explain this unique Moroccan phenomenon. First, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) has pursued very moderate—one is tempted to say extremely moderate—policies in power, whether in domestic or foreign affairs. Second, and certainly not by coincidence, this overture to popular protest and political Islam has actually improved the capacity of King Mohammed VI to rule the

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country quietly and effectively, from behind the scenes.

How an Islamic party took some power, and kept it (so far)

In response to the large-scale protests named after their starting date of February 20, 2011, King Muhammad VI moved with alacrity to offer a program of reforms. A new constitution, with some symbolic limits on his power, was approved by referendum in June 2011. For example, the king is no longer explicitly termed "sacred," and he is now legally obligated to appoint someone from the political party with a plurality in parliament to the post of prime minister.

More practically, parliamentary elections in November of that year gave the prime ministry and the lead government coalition role, for the first time, to a formerly opposition and avowedly Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (PJD). Although turnout in both plebiscites was not very high—around 50 percent by official estimates, less than half that by some unofficial ones—they helped restore a sense of legitimacy and progress to Moroccan political life. Despite the accelerating turmoil in many other Arab states, Morocco largely calmed down.

In large part this was because the PJD, while gaining unprecedented political power as an opposition Islamist party and thus defusing popular protests, subsequently pursued a noticeably modest agenda—thus avoiding the wrath either of the street or of the elite. On the one hand, as one of its Cabinet ministers told the author privately earlier this year, "It is not our job to Islamize Moroccan society—because it is already Muslim." And on the other hand, he said, "We are not here to work against His Majesty." When I pressed him on why corruption cases against some of the country's elite were not moving forward, the telling reply was, "Well, we prefer simply to turn over a new page instead."

Other safety valves helped keep Morocco on an even keel as well. The new constitution and accompanying regulations also afforded unprecedented official recognition to the country's Amazigh (Berber) culture and language. Around half of Morocco's people claim some connection to that ethnic identity, and it remains a very strong presence in the Rif and the Atlas mountainous regions of the country. A recent visit to Rabat revealed, startlingly, some street signs in the unique alphabet devised for that language and a television channel broadcasting all day only in its several distinct dialects, with Arabic subtitles for the uninitiated. In part as a result, the Mouvement Populaire party, which mainly represents the Rif Berbers, remains a staunch supporter of the current government.

Additional steps were promised, and a few delivered. In early 2013, for example, the king endorsed and sent to parliament recommendations for limited judicial reforms. These incremental steps have proven successful; over the past two years, large-scale protests have not recurred. Although it possesses none of the oil or gas riches of its Gulf Arab counterparts, Morocco nevertheless appears to have found a formula for stability through gradual reform.

As of this writing, it appears that a new phase in this uneven process is getting underway. The PJD-led parliamentary coalition is in trouble, having lost one of its key components, the venerable Istiqlal party. The PJD must now either find a new coalition partner, or call a new election. One local daily, *Akhbar al-Youm*, put it succinctly in early September: "There are many indications that the fall of the government is only a matter of time." But after weeks of cliffhanger back-room negotiations, the PJD found

a new coalition partner, and is therefore hanging on to its governing role. Behind the scenes, however, the maneuvering to replace it continues.

A signal if not major cause of this still possible transition were the divergent official Moroccan reactions to the July 3 military takeover in faraway Egypt, which ousted the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi from power. The palace publicly welcomed this dramatic turnabout, but the PJD lamented it.

But, unlike the case in Cairo or in many other regional capitals, whatever lies ahead is almost certain to be peaceful. If the PJD government falls and then is voted out of power, this will be the first time ever, anywhere, that an Islamist party was democratically elected and then democratically replaced. And if the PJD manages to hang on with a different coalition, or is re-elected after dissolving parliament, it will still not be the real power in Morocco.

King and company

In practice, whatever the fate of the PJD, the Moroccan monarchy remains supreme so far. Even under the new constitution, the king retains the right to dismiss the parliament at will, and maintains control over the country's large and powerful military and security establishment. It is still against the law to insult the king; and some critical journalists, NGO activists, and demonstrators continue to be silenced, arrested, or beaten, even in the past two years. In addition, the royal establishment and entourage as a whole—or *makhzen*, as it is termed by Moroccans—keeps a substantial measure of control or at least influence over many of the major levers of the Moroccan economy: phosphate and other mining, real estate, banking, insurance, foreign trade, transport, and more.

On a more personal level, King Muhammad VI still seems quite popular—more so than any single political party or other leader, according to the few available polls on the subject—especially among the nearly half of Moroccans who remain rural or illiterate. Besides the recent reforms and the promise of more, he continues to enjoy the aura of the changes he introduced in the first years after his accession to power in 1999, which softened the autocratic legacy of his father, Hassan II. As part of those measures, he dismissed the veteran, widely-feared interior minister Driss Basri; created a reconciliation and restitution mechanism for released political prisoners; and presided over a controversial but ultimately popular liberalization of the *moudawwana*, or Islamic personal status code.

One other key component of the king's authority is his reputation for remaining above the fray, except on extraordinary occasions. He often appears in public and in the media, but usually only for brief, carefully scripted ceremonial or charitable events. He rarely travels far abroad, perhaps because his health has not been perfect, though he is only fifty years old. And he very seldom meets U.S. or other Western officials, delegating almost all such contacts to his advisors.

Those advisors are extraordinarily powerful, though their role is largely private and informal. For example, the PJD, which nominally runs the government, almost always accepts their ultimate authority even on Islamic issues or Morocco's ongoing tolerance for tourists' behavior. Right now, the innermost circle of palace advisors is reputed to include Fouad al-Himma, Yassine Mansouri, and Rushdie Chribi. A second circle is said to include Yasser Zenagui, Mounir Majdi, and the perennially-influential Andre Azoulay. As always, however, a crucial feature of this arrangement is that all these names are subject to change without notice.

Through this many-layered and deliberately mysterious system, the king has not one but several institutional adjuncts (or buffers, or scapegoats, as circumstances suggest) that help him play his Olympian part. Approximately as in Jordan, the closest analogue and the only other non-oil-rich Arab monarchy left today, the king remains firmly in control of key controversial issues and levers of power, while an elected parliament approves Cabinet ministers who share some responsibility for domestic policy.

Beneath this surface tranquility, however, a hard-line Islamic opposition movement simmers. It is unlikely to overturn Morocco's hard-won if halting steps forward any time soon, but it could ultimately pose a serious long-term challenge. Understanding its nature, scope, and severity necessitates a closer look.

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Islamists in the wings

While the PJD represents Morocco's moderate-loyalist version of Islamic politics, its fundamentalist, genuinely opposition version is centered in the *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* ("Justice and Charity") movement, which was led by the charismatic Sufi preacher Sheikh Abdelsalam Yassine from the late 1970s until his death last December. Like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood under Mubarak, this is a not-fully legal yet tolerated organization, with a disciplined, ideologically coherent and secretive core plus a significant degree of popular sympathy. It is opposed in principle to the existing regime, but willing to coexist with the crown until circumstances allow the group to move openly against it. Estimates of *al-Adl wal-Ihsan*'s adherents range very widely, from 100,000-200,000 up to a million. This membership figure was the one issue two of its leaders explicitly refused to address in a lengthy interview with the author in Rabat in mid-February, citing "security reasons."

More surprising was their expansiveness and evident close personal familiarity with like-minded movements now vying for power, sometimes violently, in Egypt and Tunisia, where one of these Moroccan Islamist leaders had recently traveled. He saw nothing undemocratic at all about the behavior of those movements once in power. Ironically, he complained about the Salafists, because they give fundamentalism a bad name among the typically tolerant and nonviolent Moroccans.

The same lengthy interview produced some revealing exchanges about *al-Adl wal-Ihsan*'s political program. Regarding democracy, its spokesman told me that "in principle, it contradicts Islam, which assigns sovereignty to Allah, not to the people. But in practice, we can introduce Islam gradually, as the people prefer." I asked if this meant the gradual application of *sharia* (Islamic law). "Why are you so obsessed with things like cutting off the hands of thieves?" he parried in return. "And why do you care so much about petty thieves, when the king of Morocco, or the king of Saudi Arabia, are the biggest thieves in the whole country?!" When I asked if that meant he would cut off the king's hands if he could, I got no answer at all.

I encountered less evasiveness in response to more prosaic questions about the movement's attitude toward the Moroccan government as a whole. The governing PJD party, while nominally Islamic, was dismissed out of hand as a sellout to the existing, corrupt system. As for the monarchy, and its possible transformation into something more like

a European constitutional monarchy in which the king (or queen) reigns but does not rule, the senior spokesman for *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* said this: "We do not use the slogan 'the people want to bring down the regime.' But we want a totally different kind of regime, one in which the king has no real power at all, neither political nor economic nor religious. You can call that new regime by whatever name you like."

Today *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* is working to recover its strength, not only from the loss of Sheikh Yassine but also from its decision to break entirely with other, liberal elements of the Moroccan opposition with which it had aligned in the massive street protests of the February 20 Movement in 2011. Both developments have almost certainly diminished the Islamist movement's support base over the past year. Nor does it benefit much from foreign funding; the oil-rich Gulf Arab governments prefer to support not Islamists but the incumbent, a fellow monarch on the throne. As a result, *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* is lying low, not compromising its revolutionary principles while digging in for the long haul.

Mostly quiet on the western front

Again unlike most other countries in the vast Middle East and North Africa region, Morocco enjoys a relatively quiet and modest foreign policy agenda. It has a vestigial territorial dispute with Spain—which is located just a few miles across the Strait of Gibraltar, from Tangiers to Algeciras—over the two Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Mellila on Morocco's Mediterranean coast. But both countries seem quite content to keep this issue on the back burner, leaving the status quo indefinitely intact. Illustrative of the king's desire to cultivate good ties with Spain was his pardon this summer of a convicted Spanish pedophile, which resulted in short-lived protests in Morocco over the affair, which was dubbed "Danielgate," but with no lasting political repercussions.

Rabat is also concerned about the potential cross-border implications of instability and *jihadi* terrorism in neighboring Mauritania and nearby Mali, or other countries of the Sahel. Here again, however, Morocco is generally careful to insulate itself from this dangerous quagmire, by the simple expedients of tight border controls and of avoiding direct entanglement in external adventures.

More serious is the perennially tense relationship between Morocco and Algeria, its major neighbor to the east. The long border between them is mostly closed, and the two spar diplomatically over almost every imaginable issue. The key dispute concerns the Western Sahara, about which more in a moment. Yet even here, these two neighbors manage to avoid outright conflict. The problem is therefore not any direct costs, but the considerable opportunity costs of forfeited bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, and especially in counterterrorism and related security matters. As of this writing, there are new rumors of upcoming meetings between Moroccan and Algerian officials, but the recent record of such attempts at rapprochement or diplomatic progress, regrettably, does not offer major grounds for optimism.

Much the same can be said of Morocco's number-one foreign policy issue: the fate of the Western Sahara. This large but largely empty desert territory just to Morocco's west, a former Spanish colony on the horn of the Atlantic Ocean, was absorbed by the kingdom in a peaceful "Green March" across the border when Spain abruptly pulled out in 1975, in the wake of its own democratic revolution. Ever since, however, a guerrilla movement called the Polisario has contested Morocco's claim to that territory, seeking an independent state of its own instead. The Polisario is headquartered and supported

inside Algeria at a remote base in Tindouf, while Morocco maintains de facto jurisdiction throughout the former Western Sahara—including its only sizable city and now the provincial capital, Layoune.

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Decades of UN diplomacy have failed, perhaps not surprisingly, to produce a final diplomatic settlement of this dispute. Yet while highly symbolic, and therefore intractable, for both Morocco and Algeria, in practice neither country appears ready to challenge the status quo. As a result, the dispute is essentially dormant, with Moroccan rule in the territory secure albeit not universally recognized. Inside Morocco, the annexation enjoys across-the-board political support, even if local security measures in Layoune and its environs are occasionally heavy-handed. The main effects of Rabat's sole significant foreign policy conflict, in short, are felt in the continuing political estrangement between Morocco and the Polisario's uncompromising patron, Algeria.

Further afield, Morocco looks not to its immediate neighbors but just across the Mediterranean, to Europe, as its major foreign economic lifeline. In part because of Europe's own economic stagnation over the past several years, Morocco's economy has grown only slowly—and there are few signs of any immediate improvement on the horizon. This prospect poses significant challenges for all the interested parties, although an acute economic crisis in Morocco itself appears unlikely. In part this is due to the infusion of loans, grants, and investment from the oil-rich GCC Arab states, who understandably see in Morocco a safe haven for funds and a like-minded monarchy deserving of such support.

At the same time, the Moroccan establishment is also looking increasingly to the U.S., as a diplomatic and security partner of very long standing, stretching all the way back to the earliest years of American independence. In recent years, Washington has taken several steps to upgrade this historic relationship. The U.S. awarded Morocco the status of "Major Non-NATO Ally," a largely honorary yet coveted designation reserved for selected friends, with potentially positive implications for such things as arms sales or other forms of security cooperation. The State Department initiated a "strategic dialogue" with Morocco, again a largely honorary step but one that reinforces existing understandings, and could expand upon them as changing circumstances suggest. And, on a more practical plane, the U.S. has approved a Millennium Challenge Account economic and social bilateral partnership for Morocco, one worth hundreds of millions of dollars in joint development, good governance, and civil society projects.

Each of these steps, taken individually, is admittedly rather small. Taken together, however, they represent a significant and useful enhancement of bilateral relations. They also signal a welcome recognition that Morocco's role as an anchor of stability, friendship and moderation in the region must not be taken for granted.

Policy implications for America

Morocco's unusual formula of real if modest reform eclipsing a grassroots Islamist opposition movement spells stability without stagnation. For the United States, this means one less worry in a time of great uncertainty almost everywhere else in the region. For this reason alone, Morocco deserves greater atten-

tion and encouragement. And while Morocco's model cannot simply be replicated anywhere else, it suggests some lessons that might be adapted in other Arab monarchies.

Morocco's stability is also noteworthy for its alignment with an extraordinarily effective record on counterterrorism. Over the past decade, the country has suffered fewer than one terrorist incident annually, on average, and none in the past year. As al-Qaeda offshoots spread around the Maghreb and the Sahel today, the United States can count on strong Moroccan support in confronting them. But moving to the next level of regional cooperation would require rapprochement with Algeria, long estranged over Morocco's 1975 annexation of the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara. Even if that issue is not ripe for resolution, U.S. efforts to nudge these two neighbors toward greater practical cooperation would pay security dividends for all three parties.

In the near term, one other noteworthy arena for increased bilateral cooperation lies in the economic sphere. In trade, investment, energy and mineral development, tourism, and diverse other sectors, there is considerable untapped potential for Moroccan-American collaboration. Similarly promising are the signs of growing joint efforts in the cultural and educational domains, from academic exchanges to publications, performances, museum exhibitions, English-language teaching, and more.

In all of these areas, Morocco's progress at home can be matched with continuing advancement in U.S.-Moroccan relations. Ideally, this would also underpin an improving American position in North Africa as a whole. But as the Moroccan example itself suggests, the best way forward in this hugely uncertain environment may well be to take one small positive step at a time.