

# Are Morocco's Political Salafists Committed to Peace?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Despite apparent strategic shifts among Moroccan Salafists and the king's "wait and see" policy toward them, it remains unclear whether they will truly moderate as part of the political integration process.**

**F**ollowing the Arab uprisings of 2011, Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and other countries legalized previously repressed Salafist parties in the spirit of democratic inclusion. In Morocco too, Salafists have been entering the political mainstream, but in an environment that did not involve comprehensive regime change. The government therefore faces a conundrum: maintaining pre-2011 policies that stymied the Salafists' political and social integration would be antithetical to the monarchy's stated aim of political openness, yet allowing too much integration might yield results like those seen in Egypt and Tunisia. In those countries, Salafists are steadily gaining support, attempting to control more aspects of culture and politics (including trade and foreign policy), and increasing pressure on their governments to implement conservative reforms.

## SALAFIST "DERADICALIZATION"?

**L**ast year, King Muhammad VI's annual royal pardon included the release of prominent Moroccan Salafist leaders allegedly linked to the 2003 Casablanca bombings. Others were summarily pardoned after Salafists aligned themselves with the February 20 Movement (M20F), the democratic faction that has spearheaded the "Moroccan Spring" since 2011.

In all likelihood, the king's pardon of such high-profile prisoners was less a genuine move to involve them politically, and more an attempt to pacify M20F protestors and former Salafist hardliners. The palace also regarded the Salafists as a popular counterweight to the growing Shiite wave spreading westward from Iran, which Rabat saw as a potential sectarian threat far greater than that posed by Salafism.

Following the pardon, the released Salafists were permitted to join the Renaissance and Virtue Party (PRV), a moderate Islamist faction. As Moroccan expert Mohamed Darif put it, "It is in the interests of the state to have tame

cats working within political parties, rather than having to deal with wild cats operating outside them." PRV leader Mohamed Khalidi used this same language in explaining the move to the king.

Since then, some Salafists have accepted and even defended the king's legitimacy in exchange for a chance at political integration. Signs of this transformation were evident while they were still in prison, and the shift continued after their release, hinting at a genuine break from traditional Salafist thought and a willingness to embrace political engagement. For example, released leader Mohamed Fizazi has come out with fatwas against the protests and in favor of preserving the country's unity under the king. And while in prison in 2009, he spoke out against al-Qaeda's defense of terrorism. Similarly, "Ansifouna" (Do us justice), a tract written by Salafist leader Abu Hafs during his prison term, condoned the monarchy and criticized the use of violence. Other Salafists have vowed to renounce the practice of *takfir* (accusing other Muslims of heresy). The pardoned leaders also publicly supported Morocco's July 2011 reform referendum while they were still in jail, despite boycotts by many youth leaders, some left-wing groups, and al-Adl wal-Ihsan (the monarchy's most significant Islamist opposition).

In short, a symbiotic relationship of sorts has emerged between political Salafists and the monarchy. Some of them want to integrate into mainstream party politics, while the palace wants to appear pluralistic, quell dissent, and co-opt the opposition.

## ARE THEY COMMITTED TO PEACE?

**D**espite these shifts, it remains unclear whether the Salafists' behavior indicates a real break with their past, a fear of returning to prison, or both. For example, Mohammed Fizazi's recent positions give the impression of dogged support for the monarchy, but the extent to which they seem to contradict traditional Moroccan Salafist thought strongly indicates that they are part of a temporary political strategy.

Earlier this month, when mass protests against the royal pardon of a Spanish pedophile swept the country, Fizazi called the demonstrators hypocrites, arguing that they should be the "last to talk of dignity of children." This diehard defense of the king -- against protestors who saw the since-revoked pardon as sacrificing national dignity for favorable relations with Spain -- seems almost comedic or schizophrenic when compared to Fizazi's scathing criticisms of Moroccan foreign policy prior to his imprisonment. Similarly, his May 2013 open letter calling on Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to "repent for fueling separatism and *fitna*" and "to reconcile with Morocco and reopen the border" was seen more as an obsequious pledge of fealty to the king than a realistic attempt at Algerian-Moroccan rapprochement.

The statements of other Salafist leaders more brazenly contradict their claims of turning a new leaf. For example, the Berber people are a large and increasingly well-defined minority constituency in Morocco whose aims formed the basis of the M20F, of which some Salafists were a part. Yet in March, released Salafist leader Hassan al-Kettani denounced the Berber New Year as a remnant of *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic ignorance) and called for its renunciation, while released Salafist icon Omar Haddouchi publicly declared that Berbers are "apostates, agents of Jews, and the sons of pigs and apes." Such rhetoric leaves onlookers doubtful that political Salafists will keep their promises of peaceful integration and abandonment of *takfir*.

It is also important to note that many Moroccan Salafists are uninterested in joining existing parties, establishing NGOs, forming their own party, or otherwise entering the political sphere. Instead, they prefer to remain quietist in accordance with their sect's traditional ban on such forms of factionalism.

## U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

**A**lthough there is little the United States can do to influence Morocco's Salafists directly, engaging Rabat on the issue could be helpful. In particular, Washington should continue its soft-power diplomacy while encouraging the government's "wait and see" approach to the burgeoning Salafist strain. Discord between Salafist leaders --

particularly Fizazi and Mohamed al-Maghraoui (a notorious cleric exiled to Saudi Arabia after issuing a fatwa that girls as young as nine ought to marry) -- has weakened their ability to mobilize followers, so taking an active and vocal stance against Salafism or discouraging the king from engaging them may be unnecessary for now. In fact, such measures would likely entrench the existing Salafist/Islamist view that the United States props up dictators for its own interests and is dead set against Islamist success.

Some may believe that a soft-power approach gives extremists too much latitude. Yet Rabat has already established a vigilant security apparatus and a zero-tolerance policy against terrorism, with the aim of minimizing threats to the sovereign and to Morocco's relations with Washington and Europe. This fact -- combined with the Salafists' new peaceful (albeit opportunistic) approach to societal inclusion -- should prevent any widespread violence stemming from residual radicalism.

Going forward, the king is unlikely to legalize Salafist political parties in the near term, though there may come a time when he must confront that prospect with some level of seriousness. In the interim, Rabat should take note of the Salafists' political behavior, the nature of their *dawa* (outreach activities), and the content of their educational curriculum. Actions such as the recent closure of Maghraoui's madrasas in Marrakesh send a signal of intolerance to Salafists. Rather than shuttering Quranic schools, the government should nudge them or give them incentives to adopt the standards agreed upon in the Ministry of Education.

As Salafists gain followers, the palace should also consider avoiding other forms of repression (e.g., clamping down on speech freedoms, profiling based on attire, limiting freedom of assembly) that might push them toward radicalism or otherwise cause polarization. In addition, integrating Salafists would quell some of the longstanding anger -- including among mainstream Moroccans -- regarding the king's decision to join Washington's "war on terror" bandwagon. For the time being, the question of how to handle the Salafists is one for Moroccan politics to answer, and the United States need only remain apprised of their activity.

*Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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