

Egypt's Limited Reverberations in Morocco

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Brief Analysis

Spillover from Egypt remains limited in Morocco due to discord in the country's most salient opposition movement and differences in its political culture, political economy, and security apparatus.

Across the Middle East and North Africa, the Egyptian military's overthrow of Muhammad Morsi -- which was legitimized by the popular Tamarod (rebellion) movement -- has triggered fear among Islamist leaders that they may suffer the same fate, while emboldening anti-Islamists to set their sights on local targets. In Morocco, the situation is, as usual, more complex than elsewhere. Although Islamists are making their first attempt at governance there after years of political repression, the situation is very different from that seen in Egypt, Tunisia, or other countries -- primarily because the top Islamist faction, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), has a power-sharing arrangement with King Muhammad VI. In fact, the PJD's role in government serves as a legitimizing force for the monarchy, not a threat to it. The result is that the possibility of an effective Moroccan Tamarod -- one that ushers in mass copycat demonstrations, military action, and broader political instability -- remains faint.

STATE AND PARTY RESPONSES

The Moroccan monarchy applauded Morsi's ouster; King Muhammad was the first North African leader to welcome interim president Adly Mansour, hailing the Egyptian military for what he called "swift and decisive action." Meanwhile, Moroccan security forces have been quick to crack down on pro-Morsi protests, and the palace-aligned Istiqlal (Independence) Party -- the center-right faction most responsible for delivering Morocco to independence -- has called on certain leaders to "learn lessons from Morsi's fall," citing PJD prime minister Abdelilah Benkirane's links to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet the PJD, which had long distanced itself from the Brotherhood, expressed dismay at the coup and argued that it "undermines democratic legitimacy." Other Islamist groups -- including Jamaat al-Adl wal Ihsan (Justice and Charity Organization), an illegal but tolerated opposition faction with an enormous following -- claim that events in Cairo show the danger a powerful military poses to democracy, calling on the United Nations to condemn Egypt's generals. And last

month, Morocco's most well-known Salafists participated in a pan-Arab Salafist conference pledging support to Morsi.

GRASSROOTS RESPONSES

The Moroccan public is similarly divided. Constituents pushing for "modernity" and opposed to the idea of an Islamist-led coalition are empowered by Morsi's ouster, believing that an Islamist government may not fulfill promises of political and economic reform. Some journalists created a Moroccan Tamarod movement on Facebook and Twitter just a few days after the coup, calling for further constitutional changes, the dissolution of parliament, an end to human rights violations, the release of political prisoners, and the removal of the PJD and Benkirane. They also called for economic reform, including increased state-led development initiatives, independence from international financial institutions, a more equitable distribution of wealth, and reduction in government debt. In addition, the movement has asked citizens to protest on August 17-18.

The Tamarod's founders are former members of the 2011 "Moroccan Spring," also known as the February 20 Movement or M20F. In many respects, the new movement's calls for reform are indistinguishable from those of the M20F, which led to constitutional changes that in theory should have limited some of the king's powers.

On the other end of the spectrum are the skeptics: Islamists, some secularists, and others who simply want a steady status quo. In their view, Egypt's military has been plotting an overthrow since Morsi won the presidency in 2012, orchestrating power outages and fuel shortages while taking steps to ensure continued economic stagnation during his term. Some Moroccans suspect that the military received external support and even coordinated with external forces in the lead-up to the coup. Such suspicions have spurred youth factions of the PJD and al-Adl wal Ihsan to hold joint protests against Morsi's ouster in many parts of the country -- an unprecedented (albeit limited) union given the former party's support of the king and the latter's vociferous opposition. Still other Moroccans have been left with an even deeper distaste for revolution.

COPYCAT COUP UNLIKELY

One development that could increase the chances of spillover is Istiqlal's May withdrawal from the governing *koutla* (coalition). The party's departure was an attempt to replay events of the 1970s and 1990s, when the staunchly pro-monarchy faction withdrew from a coalition with the Ittihad Ishtiraki (Socialist Union), hoping to undermine its former partner and then regain control of the parliament. By recycling this tactic, the PJD's opponents hope that a popular opposition, coupled with pressure from the Tamarod and Egyptian-inspired fears about Islamist governance, will make problems for the ruling party, which is actively searching for another secular group to replace Istiqlal in the coalition. The Tamarod and Istiqlal are also demanding early elections, and given the timing of the latter's withdrawal, rumors of their affiliation abound.

For his part, the king knows that sticking with the PJD is in his best interests at the moment. If the Tamarod garners more positive attention, it will give Istiqlal and other secular factions (e.g., the Party of Authenticity and Modernity) a thinly cloaked rhetorical tool for defending the continuing fragmentation of the Islamist-secular coalition.

More broadly, events in Egypt have refueled Morocco's debate over the feasibility of Islamist governance. While proponents of that model believe the Egyptian Brotherhood was a victim of a power-hungry military, opponents believe the group's fall showed its inability to break with authoritarian behavior.

Nevertheless, the coup is unlikely to spur any similar unseating of the Islamist PJD government for several reasons. First, few Moroccans -- even those critical of the monarchy -- see themselves as revolutionaries or inciters of *fitna* (sedition). In fact, many believe that Egyptians rose up again solely because they saw that it worked in 2011, instead of just waiting for the transition's growing pains to pass.

Second, internal divisions have weakened Morocco's Tamarod movement -- one faction is calling for a comprehensive upheaval of the *makhzen* (the "deep state," including the king, his cronies, the military, and the police), while others

simply want reform and the PJD's removal. Just as M20F failed to bring about a government that would meet its demands, support for its offshoot remains limited. The Tamarod may even be weaker than M20F, as it lacks the latter's expansive Islamist support base. For example, PJD youth elements have already established a counter-group, Samidoun (We Are Steadfast), to resist the Tamarod and deny its existence as a legitimate, mobilized movement.

Third, most Moroccans believe that the costs of rebellion -- including a weakened economy and compromised security -- outweigh the benefits. In this sense, events in Egypt and Tunisia serve as a cautionary tale, given their damaged tourism industries (an economic mainstay for Morocco), high death tolls, and other laggard economic indicators.

Fourth, there are obvious differences between Egypt and Morocco's state-military and civil-military landscape. Unlike the Egyptian armed forces, Morocco's military and police are firmly under the king's purview and do not exhibit any populist pretenses. The king -- the country's real authority -- is currently set in his strategic power share with the PJD, which despite some public disillusionment has gained too large of a following and proven too instrumental in bolstering the monarch's legitimacy to be threatened by royal or military action. Moreover, Moroccans simply do not see the PJD as being as draconian as Egyptians saw the Brotherhood.

Whether the Tamarod can generate a mass following will be revealed later this month as the planned protest dates approach. For now, the Moroccan attempt to imitate the Egyptian uprising remains modest at best -- a trend that will probably continue given the country's fundamental differences from Egypt and its large, change-averse constituency that is unlikely to be moved by either the Islamist far right or the democratic left.

Vish Sakthivel lived in Morocco for three years prior to joining The Washington Institute as a Next Generation fellow. ❖

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