

Rule the Casbah: The Moroccan Monarchy's Delicate Balancing Act

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

Mar 18, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Brief Analysis

Morocco has found a formula for stability through gradual reform, with the king firmly in control behind the scenes, and this deserves strong U.S. support

The following article is one of three to emerge from "[Dateline Egypt and North Africa: Updates from the Field \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dateline-egypt-and-north-africa-updates-from-the-field\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dateline-egypt-and-north-africa-updates-from-the-field)," a Policy Forum hosted by The Washington Institute on March 5. Please also see Aaron Zelin's op-ed '[Tunisia's Post-Revolution Blues \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisia-post-revolution-blues\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisia-post-revolution-blues)" and Eric Trager's PolicyWatch "[Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Set to Prevail Despite Policy Failures \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-set-to-prevail-despite-policy-failures\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-set-to-prevail-despite-policy-failures)."

Morocco, often overlooked 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 two years ago. In response to those protests, 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.

More practically, parliamentary elections in November of that year gave the prime ministership and 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.

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.

Other steps were promised and a few delivered. Just last week, for example, the king endorsed and sent to parliament recommendations for limited judicial reform. And over the past two years, large-scale protests have not recurred. This relatively large yet largely poor kingdom, with a population of 33 million but none of the oil or gas riches of its Gulf Arab counterparts, appears to have found a formula for stability through gradual reform.

THE MAKHZEN: KING AND COMPANY

In practice, however, the Moroccan monarchy remains supreme so far. Even under the new constitution, the king retains the right to dismiss the parliament at will, along with 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 Moroccans call it, 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, and perhaps 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 in 1999, which softened the autocratic legacy of his father, Hassan II. 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 will turn only fifty years old this coming August. 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.

AL-ADL WAL-IHSAN: MOROCCO'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD-TYPE OPPOSITION

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, 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 it, until circumstances allow it to move openly against it. Estimates of al-Adl wal-Ihsan's adherents range very widely, from 100,000 to 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 in Rabat in mid-February, citing "security reasons."

More surprising was their expansiveness and evident close personal familiarity with like-minded movements now ruling 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.

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 since then have almost certainly diminished the Islamist movement's support base over the past year. Nor does the movement 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.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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 in the region. For this reason alone, Morocco deserves some attention 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.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute.



RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](#)