Self-Immolations Mar Year of Reforms in Morocco

by Sarah Feuer **(/experts/sarah-feuer)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Despite horrific scenes on the streets of Rabat, Washington should continue to encourage Morocco's process of incremental reforms.

Last week, five unemployed college graduates set themselves alight in the Moroccan capital, Rabat, echoing the December 2010 act of desperation by a Tunisian street vendor that helped spark revolts throughout the Arab world. Previously, Morocco's own "Arab Spring," which began on February 20, 2011, had seemed tame by comparison with events in other parts of the region. The outbreak of protests in the kingdom sparked a reform process that included constitutional revisions and legislative elections dominated by a relatively moderate Islamist party. For much of 2011, Morocco seemed to offer an alternative path to democratic reform that differed from the more violent trajectory witnessed elsewhere. As the Islamist-led government settles in, however, recent moves by King Muhammad VI have many observers wondering whether the emerging political system represents a model for change or a democratic facade masking an unaltered authoritarian reality.

Promising Reforms

As revolts erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, a group of Moroccan youths calling themselves the "February 20 Movement for Change" organized nationwide protests demanding an end to corruption, greater limits on the king's power, and more government attention to poverty and unemployment. Like its counterparts elsewhere, the movement remained largely leaderless and attracted a broad swath of the Moroccan population. At the same time, however, it retained a firm commitment to the monarchy, allowing the Moroccan regime to avoid the crisis of legitimacy that accompanied uprisings in other Arab states.

After tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets on February 20, the king reacted quickly: by March 9, he had announced a set of constitutional amendments ostensibly strengthening parliament and responding to protestors' demands. A blue-ribbon commission was appointed to work out the details, and a new constitution was unveiled three months later. Key amendments included recognition of Tamazight, the language of the Berber

community (roughly 40 percent of the Moroccan population), as an official language alongside Arabic; institutional mechanisms to ensure an independent judiciary; and a requirement that the king appoint the prime minister, now designated the "head of government," from the party holding the most seats in parliament.

The amendments were widely perceived as an important step in Morocco's transition to greater democracy, and an overwhelming majority of Moroccans approved the new charter in a July 1 referendum. Parliamentary elections were scheduled for the fall, and it seemed the king had skillfully managed to steer his country away from a potentially explosive situation.

To be sure, not all constituencies were convinced or calmed. The February 20 Movement, which by the end of summer had lost steam due to internal fragmentation and the success of the constitutional referendum, revived itself enough to boycott the legislative elections. It was joined by the banned Islamist movement al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Benevolence), which had long called for an end to the monarchy. For both groups, the reforms had not gone far enough.

Still, the elections took place on November 25 and were considered mostly free and fair by domestic and international monitors. The Interior Ministry reported a voter turnout of 45 percent, up from 37 percent in 2007. The relatively moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), which had been an opposition faction since its creation in 1998, took 107 of the 395 seats, followed by the center-right Istiqlal (Independence) Party with 60. True to the letter of the new law, the king named PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane as prime minister.

The Limits of Change

Despite last year's reforms, the king retains control over most major policy areas, including foreign relations, national security, and religious affairs. This should come as no surprise given that draft constitution proposed by the blue-ribbon commission was altered by the time it reached the public. For example, the original version reduced the king's powers more substantially, insisted on the "unitary" rather than "Muslim" nature of the state, and explicitly guaranteed individual liberties such as "freedom of conscience" -- all provisions that were ultimately dropped.

It is also far from certain that the more equitable distribution of power promised in the new charter will match realities on the ground. Within days of the PJD's victory at the polls, the king began appointing economic, foreign trade, and constitutional law experts to a new royal advisory council. As Benkirane spent December struggling to form a government -- a process many criticized for taking too long -- the king's council grew to include former cabinet ministers and political figures openly hostile to the PJD's ascension. Perhaps the most controversial appointment was that of Fouad Ali el-Himma, a former classmate of the king who founded the pro-palace Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) in 2009 and has been an outspoken critic of Benkirane's faction. PAM did not do well in the elections, garnering only forty-seven seats, and many interpreted el-Himma's appointment as a check against the PJD's democratically mandated governance.

For its part, the PJD has spent its first weeks in power seeking to avoid a clash with the palace. Benkirane greeted news of el-Himma's appointment with conciliatory assurances that the PJD would work constructively with the king. He was also generous in doling out ministry appointments to non-PJD legislators; of the thirty-one portfolios, nineteen went to PJD coalition partners and seven to "minister delegates" considered friendly to the king. The PJD seems to have calculated that it is better off maintaining positive relations with the palace, even if this means ceding ground to unelected decisionmakers and risking criticism that it has sold out on its pledges to increase transparency and accountability while ending corruption.

Moving Forward

Because it is too soon to tell whether Morocco's reform efforts will succeed, the United States should closely monitor developments on three fronts. The first is the degree to which the palace gives parliament room to govern. If what some observers have dubbed the king's "shadow government" sufficiently undermines the legislature, widespread disillusionment with the reform process could ensue, eroding support for democratization in general. Legislative autonomy will be crucial in the coming months because the new constitution requires parliament to promulgate laws stipulating the division of power between the branches of government, the makeup and function of the Supreme Judicial Council (among other institutions), and fiscal policy reform. The content of such laws -- and, perhaps more important, the process by which they emerge -- will reveal the extent to which democratization has truly taken hold.

Second, Washington should monitor whether the PJD-led parliament can deliver on its pledges to reform the economy. Grievances regarding poverty, the lack of jobs for college graduates, and similar issues fueled many of last year's protests. Benkirane's five-year plan proposes a government fund for the poor, the creation of 200,000 public- and private-sector jobs annually, and a reduction in the unemployment rate to 8 percent, with emphasis on increasing employment opportunities for young university graduates, roughly 20 percent of whom remain out of work. Although these proposals are popular, Benkirane has not offered specific plans to achieve them. Doing so will be difficult given Morocco's formidable budget deficit and the increasingly precarious European market, which the kingdom relies on for roughly 60 percent of its trade.

Third, as the country approaches the first anniversary of the mass demonstrations, the potential for renewed protests looms. The recent self-immolations, the opposition's efforts to embolden what remains of the February 20 Movement, and the persistent challenge posed by radical groups like al-Adl wal-Ihsan could all spell trouble for the Benkirane government if it does not demonstrate progress soon. As the situation evolves, Washington should work closely with the king to validate a process of incremental but responsive reforms, including engagement with the government formed by means of his constitutional changes. As horrific as the self-immolations are, the United States should resist any pressure to take precipitous action.

Sarah Feuer, a doctoral candidate in politics at Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies, conducted field research in Morocco in summer 2011. ❖

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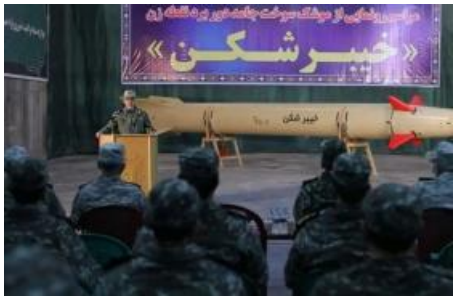

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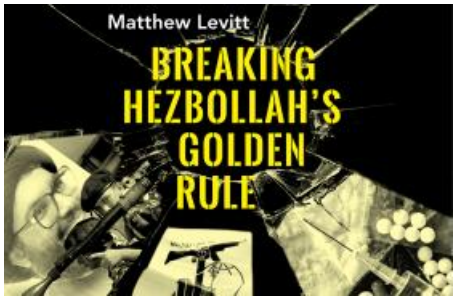

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