RICE UNIVERSITY'S
BAKER INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

ISSUE BRIEF 05.25.18

Action and Reaction: Royal Rhetoric Responds to the PJD

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INTRODUCTION

In the heady days of early 2011, Morocco's King Mohammed VI responded to protests demanding jobs, political liberalization, and an end to corruption by calling for a reform process that would begin with revisions to the constitution and new elections. The resulting attenuation of the February 20 Movement, and the high participation rates in the ensuing July referendum and November legislative elections, suggested the palace's reaction to the initial unrest had convinced most Moroccans that the monarchy understood the source of their grievances and intended to be a partner in redressing them. By the winter of 2011, the regime appeared to have passed an important stress test.

But if the king had managed to puncture the protest movement and steer developments in a state-sanctioned direction, he soon faced another challenge with the results of the November vote. The emergence of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) as the dominant player in parliament—a body that had been emboldened, if modestly, by the new constitution—implied the palace now had a companion, and perhaps even a competitor, in the reform process it sought to lead. Notwithstanding the regime's ostensible stability, the PJD's rise did elicit intriguing rhetorical responses from the monarchy on a range of issues. While it can be tempting to write off discursive shifts as mere instances of cosmetic change, Morocco's contemporary history is replete with examples of monarchs implementing policy changes in an effort to fulfill their own rhetorical commitments or to fend off opposition groups seeking to highlight discrepancies between royal discourse and action. Thus, the monarchy's rhetorical responses to the PJD's rise are worth examining, both for what they suggest about the monarchy's perception of its own vulnerabilities and because they ultimately helped to frame the environment in which both the PJD and the regime could operate.

This paper explores the monarchy's rhetorical responses to the PJD's ascension in two realms: political accountability and religion. A concluding section considers what these responses suggest about the evolving relationship between the monarchy and Morocco's leading Islamist party in the post-Arab Spring landscape.

POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Consistent with a key change introduced by the new constitution, one of the king's first responses to the PJD's 2011 electoral victory was to appoint a representative of the leading party in parliament—as it turned out, the PJD's Abdelilah Benkirane—as prime minister. The constitutional innovation of Article 47 had sought to make Moroccan governments more representative of the voting public, so the fact that the PJD came to be associated with this increased

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representativeness was likely not lost on the monarchy. Following the PJD's victory, royal rhetoric increasingly linked the matter of political representation to accountability.

The king's annual addresses to the opening session of parliament have been revealing in this regard.[1] In comparison with the half-dozen years preceding the PJD's election victory, Mohammed VI's speeches to the legislature since 2011 have contained more elaborate references to the responsibilities of parliamentarians—and especially of political parties—to the citizenry, pointed critiques of the public administration for failing to deliver services to the public, and repeated entreaties to elected officials to prioritize the needs of citizens over their own partisan interests. Compare, for example, the language of Mohammed VI's speech to the newly elected legislature in 2007 with the language of his 2011 speech to the newly elected, PJD-dominated parliament. In 2007, the king had merely noted that

> *representation of the nation is neither a privilege nor a renting of a position, and even less a pledge of immunity to preserve one's personal interests. Representation means, on the contrary, assuming a considerable task, and it implies an unwavering commitment to work for the general interest.*

By contrast, in 2011, he singled out the role of parties in stressing that

> *the search for efficient [political and development-related] solutions depends ... on the willingness of serious national parties to assume their political responsibility by presenting clear and differentiated social projects. These must be in the form of rigorous, efficient, and realistic programs, which must be in line with the actual expectations of present and future generations, so that the citizen has the freedom to choose freely qualified elites who are able to meet expressed expectations.*

To be sure, such shifts in tone could have resulted from the monarchy's desire to demonstrate sensitivity to the demands of the Moroccan public following the 2011 protests. Still, the substantive changes in royal rhetoric invoking popular representation and accountability suggest a more targeted response to the PJD's ascension. For example, relative to their pre-2011 variants, the annual speeches to the legislature since the PJD's election victory have included more elaborate articulations of the need for a robust opposition in parliament, implicitly conveying a desire to check the PJD's power there. In 2006, the king briefly noted that elections

> *require the forging of alliances in order to facilitate the emergence of a homogenous majority and a constructive opposition.*

In 2011, by contrast, he elaborated:

> *We are convinced that if the democratic system is based on the power of the majority and the rule of law, it is equally based on the positive participation of the parliamentary opposition. As a result, the implementation of the related provisions [called for in the new constitution] is likely to allow this opposition to constitute a responsible supervisory authority and a constructive force for proposing legislation.*

And whereas speeches before the Moroccan Spring had made no mention of elected officials' patriotism, in every speech from 2011 to 2016 the king noted at least once that patriotism constituted a required attribute of elected officials. The rhetorical innovation was likely not a coincidence, and would have served to implicitly question the Islamists' loyalty to the nation-state.

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RELIGION

The constitutional reforms of 2011 left untouched the king's status as the country's chief religious authority and reinforced the decades-old separation of religious questions from the political sphere, while retaining the close link between religion and state. As such, there was little reason to expect a shift in policies in the religious realm following the PJD's ascension. On a policy level, that expectation has been borne

out. The monarchy has continued to solidify its control over religious institutions and implement reforms to religious education curricula, much as it was doing before the Arab Spring. This has been reflected in decrees bringing institutes of higher Islamic learning under state supervision, continued alterations to the curricula and textbooks of Islamic studies classes, and ongoing investments in imam training.[2]

However, the emergence of an Islamist party in a dominant position did elicit some intriguing rhetorical reactions from the monarchy. For the first time, the king's Throne Speech of 2012 made reference to the "secular identity of Morocco," phrasing that would reappear in 2013 and 2015. The 2012 speech also highlighted the new constitution's provision identifying the High Council of Ulama (a body chaired by the king) as the sole organ responsible for consulting the palace on religious affairs. These allusions would have been less remarkable had they appeared in the Throne Speech of July 2011—i.e., shortly after the relevant provisions had been enacted. But they emerged only after the PJD's electoral victory. Likewise, the 2013 Throne Speech cited royal initiatives aimed at increasing the "religious security" of the kingdom to preserve its "Islamic identity"—language reflecting the regime's drive to weed out extremist ideologies and reassert the state's sponsorship of a religious identity revolving around Sunni and Maleki rites and certain Sufi practices—even though the relevant reforms had been launched a decade prior. The timing of such statements suggests the monarchy may have believed the PJD's electoral success was reason enough to remind citizens of the palace's primacy in the religious realm.

ACTION AND REACTION

Two sets of broader observations flow from the royal responses highlighted above. The first concerns the matter of rhetoric versus policy. A prominent debate among Morocco-watchers has concerned the extent to which the events and aftermath of 2011 fundamentally altered the state of affairs in the kingdom. For some, the promising constitutional language and royal discourse acknowledging deficiencies in Morocco's reform trajectory have been cosmetic, whereas others see 2011 as having inaugurated a deeper, if incomplete, shift in the division of political authority between the monarchy and elected governments at the national and local levels.[3] The debate between skeptics and believers is not likely to find resolution anytime soon, but in the meantime, we should be cautious about dismissing the import of rhetorical shifts brought about by the PJD's rise. The monarchy's increasing discursive attention to accountability and good governance, for example, is a positive development, even if it also partly reflects an effort to undercut the leading party's claims to represent a broad base of Moroccan society, and even if such rhetoric has not always been accompanied by immediate policy changes. Authority in government may have been a welcome development for the PJD, but it also increased the chances the party would be held to account for its governance, a liability the monarchy has deftly exploited. How the PJD manages the challenge of governing under constraints while avoiding blame for unfulfilled promises will be a key determinant of the party's success in the coming years. But rhetorical shifts also matter because discourse ultimately delineates the range of options available to the regime and provides potential opportunities for opponents to seize in holding the regime to account. In my research into Morocco's evolving regulations implicating religious institutions and discourse over the years, I have found that policy shifts often resulted from pressure on the part of opposition groups urging the Alaouite monarchs to follow through on their stated policy commitments.[4] Even in a non-democratic setting, Morocco's rulers evidently knew they would be judged partly by how closely they adhered to their stated policy preferences. Given the country's reform trajectory in recent years, this trend is only likely to increase.

A second set of observations concerns the PJD's Islamism. The party's rise in 2011 mirrored the fortuitous trend for Islamist

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movements elsewhere in the region at the time, one that seemed to finally test the long-debated hypothesis that Islamists in power would "moderate" their positions on matters such as gender equality, religion in public life, and individual rights. That debate carried less potency in Morocco, where the PJD had largely given up its overt religious rhetoric by the time the 2011 protests broke out, and where most analysts assumed the enduring presence of the monarchy would limit the PJD's power anyway. If the inclusion-moderation thesis had posited that political inclusion would lead Islamist parties to become less identifiably Islamist, the Moroccan case suggested the reverse: namely, that reducing one's Islamism could lead to greater political inclusion. But this has posed a dilemma for the PJD insofar as preserving its presence in the political arena risks the loss of supporters originally drawn to the party precisely for its Islamist roots. Leaving overtly religious activities to its affiliated civil society organization, the Movement of Unity and Reform (*al-tawhid wa'l-islah*), has mitigated that risk somewhat, but has not eliminated it.[5]

Meanwhile, the examples highlighted here suggest the monarchy has continued to portray the PJD as an Islamist actor, even if only implicitly. The palace may find it advantageous to define this Islamism as inherently at odds with fealty to the nation, as the speeches before the legislature implied. But this tactic arguably presents something of a dilemma for the monarchy, because the more it continues to portray the PJD as a party with religious roots and motivations, the more it risks bolstering the party's popularity among conservative segments of society that otherwise might have been inclined to look elsewhere for political representation. In the aftermath of 2011, the PJD and the monarchy have evidently been competing not only for stewardship of the country's reform process, but also for a monopoly on the right to define precisely what it means to be an Islamist party in post-Arab Spring Morocco. That competition is likely to continue, with implications not only for the future of Moroccan Islamism but for political Islam across the region.

ENDNOTES

1. All speeches cited herein, including addresses before the opening session of parliament and the Throne Speeches, are available at https://bit.ly/297FF92. Translations are my own.

2. For more on these reforms, see Sarah J. Feuer, *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chapter 6.

3. An insightful reflection of this debate recently appeared in Intissar Fakir's essay, "Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 28, 2017, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/12/28/morocco-s-islamist-party-redefining-politics-under-pressure-pub-75121.

4. See Feuer, *Regulating Islam*.

5. For more on the PJD's relationship to its sister movement, see Avi Max Spiegel, *Young Islam: The New Politics of Religion in Morocco and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 50-54 and 178-185.

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This issue brief is part of a two-year research project on pluralism in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. The project is generously supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Cite as:
Feuer, Sarah J. 2018. *Action and Reaction: Royal Rhetoric Responds to the PJD*. Issue brief no. 05.25.18. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

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