Tahrir Forum

Illusions of Change in Morocco

By Sean Yom

For those stricken with thirst in a desert, even brackish water will taste sweet.

Herein lays the strategy of Morocco's monarchical regime—"regime" here meaning the palace, its security organs, and major players from the sprawling elite network known as the *makhzen*. Nearly six years after the Arab Spring, this autocracy has made the ultimate gamble: can it indefinitely maintain the vast distance between its democratic promises versus the authoritarian status quo? So long as it contrasts Moroccan stability against collapsing states like Libya and Syria, broadcasts new pledges for future reform, and conducts exercises like this October's parliamentary elections, so its thinking goes, then the world will applaud Morocco.

To be sure, this ploy is working wonders with foreigners. Western journalists frequently praise the kingdom as a "model" of democratic reform. American think tankers see its monarchy as the region's most progressive, not least because it cooperates with Washington's security and economic interests. Yet the problem is the primary threat to any nondemocratic regime is hardly the outside world. It is its own society. Revolutions occur when a popular mass no longer finds its government credible, and would rather accept the uncertainty of a new political order than suffer from the constraints of the old one. And today, there exist two reasons to worry that Moroccans themselves are not buying their regime's insistence that all is well.

First, the core structure of Moroccan politics has not changed since the Arab Spring, which instigated the historic 20 February Movement, several thousand street protests, and, ultimately constitutional amendments. Yet though now the official government is formed by parliament, all resemblances to constitutional monarchies stop here. This is still a near-absolutist kingship, but for a unique reason. In most other Arab monarchies, autocratic royals either lack religious authority or attempt to claim Islamic credentials based upon their political leadership. In Morocco, by contrast, the head of the Alaouite Dynasty is seen as Commander of the Faithful, embodying the will of the Muslim community—and from *that* fount of legitimacy flows incontestable political power.

Thus the palace still makes all major domestic and foreign policy decisions, treats the legislative branch as an afterthought, runs a parallel media sector masquerading as the mainstream press, and controls the levers of state repression (which today still smothers critics). This flies in the face of what parliamentary democracy, even in constitutional monarchies, requires—the absence of any unelected tutelary authority, whether they be kings, generals, or priests, who can singlehandedly dictate the political system and veto all elected officials without institutional accountability to society. The 2011 constitutional amendments did not result in this because they never intended to in the first place. Most of all, the public is growing tired of this charade. Less than half of all voters bothered to turn out for the first parliamentary elections after the 2011 amendments,

and that number appears to have declined further to 43 percent in October's contest. Notably, these participation rates are based on the number of officially registered voters. Around eight million voting-age Moroccans have not bothered registering to vote, underscoring a harsh reality: the promise of gradual reform is giving way to open ire that the Arab Spring brought little except more flowery language to the constitution.

The second reason to worry is that the underlying economic problem—a huge youth demographic, and too few jobs—has also not changed since 2011. About 30 percent of the population is between the ages of 15 and 29, and they suffer massive unemployment. Today, four out of five unemployed people fall in this age group. One reason is that the educational system does not meet the demands of the job market. In rural areas especially, education is still inadequate; one-third of the populace remains illiterate, which seeds economic informality and poverty. For the large urban middle class, schools and universities are more attuned to producing paper credentials rather than viable skills, such as training in competitive sectors like technology or else vocational expertise for new industries like automobile manufacturing. In essence, too many students are still encouraged to pursue theoretical degrees in university settings in hopes of landing in a cushy managerial or government office.

Public opinion polls reveal that these issues are not disappearing from the mentality of many young Moroccans. For them, material well-being and economic dignity remain foremost concerns. Indeed, a recent Gallup study showed one out of three youths wish to leave the kingdom altogether due to unfulfilled aspirations and lack of opportunities (which, perversely, may help the government since it removes a key protest demographic). Moroccan youths also evoke intense frustration with endemic corruption, including the palace's own economic ties to the business elite, and bemoan that personal and familial connections still matter more than merit when climbing the ladder of bureaucracy.

These two political and economic realities make a mockery of the promises made in 2011, when the monarchy began formulating its "model" of change. To be sure, as many researchers note, the regime defeated the 20 February Movement and other protest groups during the Arab Spring using a mix of repression, co-optation, and reform promises. Today, though, a more troubling future beckons. Social unrest continues to simmer despite pressure upon the few remaining independent media outlets to avoid these stories. Protests regularly break out whenever hot-button issues trigger communal anger—from rising utility prices to fiscal austerity—and reports of police brutality, arbitrary detention, and torture against critics still leak out, despite the kingdom's constant ban against human rights monitors.

The economic and political reality of Morocco has become untenably divorced from the rosy picture invoked for Western audiences. Moroccans are thirsty for change, and many are no longer drinking the brackish water from the palace. There is little reason why they should: After nearly six years of "democratization," things are still the dreary same.

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