

# Morocco's "New" Political Face: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*

by John P. Entelis

## SUMMARY

Despite its relatively pluralistic order, Morocco suffers from many of the same socioeconomic and political issues as its neighbors and has seen persistent pro-democracy protests by the "February 20 Movement for Change" since uprisings swept the region this year.

In the face of constant protests, King Mohamed VI called for a drastic overhaul of the constitution and early elections, preempting demands for fundamental changes that would transform the country into a constitutional monarchy.

The voter turnout rate of 45 percent for the November parliamentary elections reflected the prevailing political apathy and cynicism toward a process that is seen to be managed and manipulated by the palace.

The victory of the Islamist-oriented Justice and Development party (PJD) does not represent a fundamental rupture from past practices given that the PJD rejects the label of "Islamist" and accepts the authoritarian privileges of the king.

In the absence of fundamental changes to the political structure, Morocco is certain to face instability. The U.S. should encourage meaningful reforms, by expanding the scope and content of democracy and governance funding to the country and renewing Morocco's MCC grant if democratic reforms are implemented beforehand.

The results of the November 25, 2011 Moroccan parliamentary elections may have come as a surprise to many observers given the victory of an Islamist party, but for the youthful supporters of the "February 20 Movement for Change" who boycotted the elections, the outcome had little impact on the issue that most mattered to them—the establishment of a genuine constitutional democracy in which the king reigns but does not rule. The immediate backdrop for these pre-emptive elections originally scheduled for September 2012 was the political earthquake felt throughout the region following the overthrow of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt at the hands of mass-based popular movements. The bullet-like speed in which the monarchy responded to the first wave of popular protests in early 2011 by passing constitutional reforms and calling for early elections was emblematic of the regime's long-standing practice of seeming to adapt to change in the face of immediate political challenges without fundamentally altering the calculus of power or diluting the monarchy's monopoly of coercive force. Indeed, the success in these elections of the Islamist-oriented Justice and Development party (PJD), itself pro-monarchist and nationalist like all legally certified and electorally incorporated political parties, represents little change in the macro political character of the Moroccan state.

## THE ARAB SPRING COMES TO MOROCCO

Morocco has been unable to avoid the kinds of socioeconomic and political challenges experienced by its neighbors in the Near East. Protests erupted on February 20, 2011, bringing thousands of people to the streets of the country's major cities under the umbrella of the "February 20 Movement for Change." Launched on Facebook by cadres of disaffected young people, the mobilization called for democratic change, greater economic opportunities, lower food prices, freedom for Islamist prisoners, Berber rights, a freer media, and better social services. Morocco's political space has long been constrained by an autocratic system of rule dominated by the *makhzen*, or secretive royal court elite, who hold the real reins of power. Yet, unlike in pre-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, civil society in Morocco has never been strangled to the point of political impotence. Particularly after King Mohamed VI succeeded his more autocratic father, Hassan II, in 1999, a broad range of associational groups representing religious, ethnic, political, media, student, feminist and economic interests has been permitted to operate in relative freedom as long as the "red lines" of Moroccan politics are never crossed: the sanctity of Islam, the primacy of the monarchy, and the state's claim upon the Western Sahara.

*“The king’s proposals went far beyond any changes previously recommended, in part to coopt and preempt populist demands that could transform Morocco into a genuinely constitutional monarchy à la Spain.”*

Given this relatively pluralistic order, contestation has taken place within both formal institutions and outside of them, including regular demonstrations and protests staged by aggrieved groups against unjust government policies but rarely directed at the king. The successive waves of protest unleashed on February 20 have therefore fallen short of being truly insurrectionary. Rather, the “revolutionary” character of the protests lies in how they have incorporated such politically diverse groups as socialists, Berberists, feminists, and Islamists, among others.

The February 20 movement has challenged the efficacy of the king’s established approach of top-down gradual reform. In the face of constant protests, the king delivered a major speech to the nation on March 9, 2011, effectively surrendering to popular pressure as never before. Echoing the protesters’ very demands, Mohamed VI called for a drastic overhaul of the constitution intended to reinforce the country’s “democratic principles.” His proposals went far beyond any changes previously recommended, in part to coopt and preempt populist demands that could transform Morocco into a genuinely constitutional monarchy à la Spain. The sweep of the proposed changes included formal recognition of the Amazigh (Berber) language and identity; consolidation of the rule of law and protection of human rights; creation of an independent judiciary and respect for the separation of powers, with enhanced authority for the parliament and prime minister; a larger role for political parties and establishment of institutions to guarantee good governance. All these reform measures were incorporated into a new amended constitution that was put to a national referendum on July 1, 2011, receiving 98.5 percent approval by the electorate with a staggering 72 percent turnout—results that most observers found hardly credible.

For many of the protesters, however, these reform measures seem insufficient to overcome the deeply held resentment over corruption, injustice, and the despotic attitude of the *makhzen*. While the king himself is still regarded with respect among Moroccans, including most of the protesters, there has long been a feeling that too much power remains concentrated in the monarchy. Critics point to the numerous amendments in the new constitution that reaffirm the king’s power, such as his status as “commander of the faithful,” the sanctity of his person, his authority to govern by issuing non-questioning legal decrees, and the constitutional inviolability of the monarchy. While the amended constitution has increased citizens’ political, social, and legal rights, executive powers remain fully concentrated in the monarchy. The king, for example, still names the prime minister, approves the cabinet over which he presides, and can dissolve the government at any time. As a result, the more insistent among the demonstrators continue to challenge the very political architecture of the monarchical state, believing that the constitutional reforms are part of a pseudo-democratic process intended to give Moroccans half the reforms they deserve.

## ELECTORAL POLITICS

The political environment preceding the November 25 elections was one of voter apathy, indifference, and cynicism. Several significant segments of the Moroccan electorate boycotted the balloting altogether including the most powerful albeit illegal Islamist movement in the country, the Justice and Welfare Association, along with the followers of the February 20 Movement and three small but politically animated groupings, the United Socialist Party (PSU), the Democratic Socialist Vanguard Party (PADS), and Annahj Addimocrati (“The Democratic Way”). The overwhelming electoral support given in the constitutional referendum led the regime to believe that there would be an equally impressive participation rate for the parliamentary balloting, although voter turnout in the preceding legislative elections in 2007, for example, was a historically low 37 percent. Until the eve of the elections themselves, thousands of demonstrators and protesters took to the streets of Rabat and Casablanca in peaceful rallies calling for a boycott of the voting.

The overall mood in the country, particularly among the young, poor, and unemployed, was one of indifference bordering on disdain regarding a process long considered managed and manipulated from the top. The voter turnout rate of 45 percent reflected the prevailing political apathy in the country, especially among the young. The high absenteeism among the young highlights the huge age gap still present between those holding power and those who are victims of its abuse. Although 65 percent of Morocco’s population is under the age of 40, that age group represents only 9.2 percent of the deputies in the 2007 parliament. If one combines both houses of the legislatures, the Chamber of Deputies and the Chamber of Counselors, the representation of those under 40 has declined in the three previous legislatures from 71 in 1997 to 41 in 2002 to 36 in 2007.

The 2011 elections were to fill the 395 seats of the lower house of the country’s bicameral legislature, the Majlis al-Nuwab (Chamber of Deputies), for a five-year term. The electoral landscape was dominated by both long established and newly formed political parties, many organized into broad alliances. The largest of such groupings was the eight member “Coalition for Democracy,” baptized as the “G8.” This coalition brought together the traditional monarchist political parties, Rally of National Independents (RNI), Constitutional Union (UC), and Popular Movement (MP), with the recently formed Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), the small left-wing political movements, Socialist Party (PS), Left Wing Green Party (PGV), and Labor Party (PT), and the Islamist Party of Renewal and Virtue (PRV).

This Coalition for Democracy competed against the Koutla grouping of the nationalist Independence Party (PI), the left-leaning Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), and the crypto-communist Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). The Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (PJD) decided to stand alone, believing it had the best chance based on pre-election polling data and the voting results of the previous two parliamentary elections in 2002 and 2007, where it placed third and second, respectively.

*“The overall mood in the country was one of indifference bordering on disdain regarding a process long considered managed and manipulated at the top.”*

*“The PJD has publicly disavowed the label of “Islamist party” preferring instead to describe itself as a political party “with an Islamic frame of reference.””*

## THE PJD LEADS THE PACK

The PJD came ahead in the election, winning 107 seats, or 27 percent, of the vote while the Koutla group garnered 117 seats, or 15 percent, of the vote. Since constitutional amendments now stipulate that the prime minister must be selected from the party with the most seats, PJD leader Abdelillah Benkirane will form a new government, most likely in coalition with the Koutla group. The “G8” Coalition for Democracy did not do as well as people expected given its political proximity to the king although six members of the group received a total of 166 seats.

For those in the February 20 Movement and their supporters, the election did not represent a fundamental rupture with past practices, rendering the voting outcome meaningless. Two dimensions of this skepticism are worth noting: the very label of “Islamist” is questioned both by the PJD itself and more authentically Islamist groups like the long-banned Justice and Welfare Association. The PJD has publicly disavowed the label of “Islamist party,” preferring instead to describe itself as a political party “with an Islamic frame of reference.” During the election campaign it emphasized the party’s goals of seeking to improve social services, provide employment, and combat corruption as opposed to highlighting such hot button issues as whether or not women should wear the Islamic headscarf. The PJD’s head, Abdelillah Benkirane, had to distance himself from previously derogatory comments he had made about Berbers and homosexuals, having tried to ban a 2010 concert in Morocco by the openly gay singer Elton John on the belief that his presence would encourage homosexuality in the country.

The other aspect of the election results that are being touted as “revolutionary”—the possible emergence of an “Islamist”-led government—recalls the same political drama and public attention paid to the selection of Abderrahman Youssefi, the head of the USFP, as prime minister from 1998 to 2002. This policy of *alternance* was then heralded as the beginning of a true reform era in which the socialist opposition, as opposed to the usual pro-monarchist parties, was given the chance to govern, reflecting King Hassan’s determination to overcome the dark years of political oppression referred to as the “years of lead.” Yet this so-called reform phase of alternating government proved of little consequence in reconfiguring the existing power structure, implementing the rule of law, or enshrining civil liberties—the very issues that first led protestors into the streets of Moroccan cities in February 2011.

The PJD differs little from its non-Islamist counterparts in that it is fully willing to subsume its so-called democratic aspirations in support of the monarchy’s authoritarian privileges. (This is not the case with the infinitely more popular and revolutionary Justice and Welfare Association that has remained illegal as its founder Abdesslam Yassine was the first Moroccan political figure to openly call for the dissolution of the country’s absolute monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic.) The regime’s knack for political adaptation will, thus, likely ensure the monarchy’s survival even as protests continue unabated in the post-election period.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Moroccan-American relations have had a long and fruitful history beginning with Morocco's diplomatic recognition in 1777 of the newly independent United States, the first country in the world to do so. In the modern period, Washington has continued to view Morocco as a special partner in the Middle East and North Africa given the country's relative moderation in world affairs and more benign form of autocratic rule. In a region inhabited by a variety of despotic rulers often with close military, economic, and political ties to the United States, Morocco was long considered a reliable and cooperative ally, albeit one devoid of major strategic significance. Despite the regime's many political imperfections, Washington was more than willing to accept the monarchy's self-defined form of "evolutionary change" and "incremental democratization" however much political rights were being denied or human rights violated, especially under the rule of Hassan II from 1961 to 1999.

The transformational nature of the Arab Spring has fundamentally altered the political environment and, as such, has forced a reconsideration of how the U.S. views and interacts with the Arab world. Washington should:

- *Encourage the monarchy, both publicly and privately, to implement in a sincere and timely fashion the many constitutional changes it has introduced, giving promise that real democratic change is forthcoming.*  
Past experience has shown that noble goals and worthy aspirations have not always been followed by effective implementation. The U.S. should refrain from praising the king's efforts, as it has done in the past, until genuine reforms are actually implemented.
- *Meet with members of the February 20 movement and impress on Rabat the immediacy and legitimacy of their many grievances and demands.*  
In particular, it will be important to articulate that the various groups represented by the movement are suspicious of regime intent given that in the past, manipulation and dissimulation substituted for authentic reform.
- *Shift the content and focus of USAID democracy and governance programming for Morocco, as well as increase the level of this funding.*  
Of the seven Arab countries with a USAID mission, Morocco receives the smallest amount of bilateral assistance from USAID. Moreover, D&G programming has focused excessively on improving the technical expertise of government institutions rather than more politically oriented work. USAID would do well to invest more in political party and civil society development, particularly because Moroccan civil society organizations have a high absorptive capacity and are less reluctant to accepting direct funding from the U.S. government in comparison to other Arab countries.
- *Support Morocco's democratization efforts by rewarding the implementation of political reforms, which will ensure that the changes in the new constitution are part of an ongoing process of reform and*

*“ In a region inhabited by a variety of despotic rulers, Morocco was long considered a reliable and cooperative ally, albeit one devoid of major strategic significance. ”*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John P. Entelis is a Professor of Political Science and Director of Middle East Studies at Fordham University. He is editor of The Journal of North African Studies.

## ABOUT POMED

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

## ABOUT THE POLICY BRIEF SERIES

POMED Policy Briefs are short analysis pieces for U.S. policymakers on issues of core relevance to democratic development in the Middle East and North Africa. The briefs feature leading American, European, and regional authors from academia, think tanks, practitioner organizations, and human rights groups. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Project on Middle East Democracy. For more information, please contact the series editor, Daphne McCurdy.

*not the end point of such a process.* Morocco's five year \$697.5 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact is set to expire in 2012. This assistance should only be renewed if Morocco takes tangible steps toward expanding civil liberties and political rights during the negotiation process.

- *Assist Morocco in its efforts to overcome extreme socioeconomic inequality by renewing the country's MCC grant if democratic reforms are implemented beforehand.* Morocco's small, privileged elite monopolizes the majority of the country's wealth and opportunities at the expense of a relatively impoverished and politically impotent mass public, fueling populist discontent and enabling extremist groups. A grant focused on poverty reduction and fighting corruption could help address this inequality.
- *Apply pressure on Rabat to work more assiduously to resolve the long festering Western Saharan conflict, which has undermined political stability, economic development, and regional security.* The current Senate Foreign Ops appropriations resolution for fiscal year 2012 conditions \$1 million of U.S. foreign military funding to Morocco on the protection of human rights in the Western Sahara. This language should be leveraged to encourage positive changes.

## CONCLUSION

Morocco has escaped the most violent excesses experienced by some of its neighbors during the historic uprisings this year, but it has been equally exposed to the same kinds of societal pressures and demands for political change being voiced by all Arabs. The United States thus finds itself at a crucial diplomatic and political crossroads vis-à-vis Morocco: do the constitutional amendments passed in July 2011 and the results of the parliamentary elections of November 25, 2011 constitute sufficient acts of genuine movement away from autocracy towards an authentic democracy or are they simply manipulative measures intended to maintain the status quo under a different political formula? What is clear, is that in the absence of a fundamental change in the nature of how political power is obtained, maintained, and employed in which corruption, privilege, and patronage still dominate the body politic as embodied in the *makhzen*, Morocco is certain to suffer a more violent Arab spring with uncertain consequences for the monarchy's very survival.

Washington must encourage Rabat to accelerate the process of democratic change. The constitutional reforms and reconfigured electoral landscape are only the first steps in a multistep process that no longer has the luxury of time as the revolutionary nature of the Arab Spring has so dramatically demonstrated.