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Research Report

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“Smartness” Without Vision

The Moroccan Regime in the Face of Acquiescent Elites and Weak Social Mobilization

Saloua Zerhouni

In contrast to other North African and Middle Eastern rulers, the Moroccan monarchy has been able to maintain and stabilize its reign in the face of popular protest. In response to demonstrations by the 20 February Movement (M20) in early 2011, King Mohammed VI announced the reform of the constitution and the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy. In addition, the regime has successfully bought off opposition by appropriating the main reform demands and by bringing in figures from the former opposition Justice and Development Party (Parti de la justice et du développement, PJD) to lead the government. But although the regime was able to absorb social unrest and to pull the rug from underneath the M20, protests and discontent have continued in Morocco, as major issues such as fighting corruption, establishing social justice and dealing with youth unemployment have not been addressed. Thus, although the moves of the monarchy have earned it the label of being “politically smart” and Morocco being “exceptional,” the country is far from immune to the unrest that has rocked neighboring countries. Europeans should therefore support a peaceful path of more substantial reforms to avoid regression and potentially violent escalations.

Recent developments in Morocco show that reforms remain more at the level of discourse than reality. There are major disparities and contradictions between what the regime claims with regards to democratization and respect of human rights and the actual practices of political control and silencing dissident voices. Two cases confirm this trend: The first one was the arrest in September 2013 of Ali Anouzla – who has since been released on bail – one of the most popular independent journalists and editor of the Arabic version of the online newspaper *Lakome*. Anouzla was charged for

“inciting terrorism” after posting on his website an indirect link to a video titled “Morocco: Kingdom of Corruption and Despotism,” which was released by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and posted first on the website of Spain’s leading daily newspaper *El Pais*. The detention of Anouzla was clearly meant to silence him following a series of articles he had written that were critical of the monarchy, and more specifically the King. The second example constitutes a breach of the spirit – rather than the letter – of the 2011 constitution: The October 2013 cabinet reshuffle witnessed a

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major increase in the number of “technocrats” loyal to the Palace who were appointed to strategic portfolios such as the Ministry of Interior, national education and business.

Gradual reforms, uncertain outcomes

The idea of gradualism has been part of the Moroccan political discourse for many decades. But the reform process has been open-ended, broad and has not had well-defined objectives. Thus, there have often been contradictions between the proclaimed vision and the actual implementation of reforms. Regardless of the shortcomings of the reforms, they do serve a political goal, namely to keep both the political elites and the social forces busy with these reforms rather than guaranteeing their implementation into practice. In addition, the reform process is meant to reinforce the image of a modernizing monarchy at the international and regional levels. At the national level, it helps the monarchy to portray itself as the sole credible and efficient institution that is able to trigger and implement reform in the country.

The M20 and the monarchy's reactions

In spite of Morocco's alleged exceptionalism with regards to the wave of protests in the region, in 2011 a group of online activists led the calls for nationwide protests in favor of major political changes and to organize the 20 February Movement. The first demonstrations were massive and mobilized some 200,000 citizens in 53 cities across the country in early 2011. The movement was originally composed of a mixed group of opposition forces with different ideological backgrounds, ranging from left and radical left-wing political parties to Islamist movements. The most active and involved among them were the Islamist movement al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan (Justice and Charity), the United Socialist Union and the Moroccan Association of Human Rights

(AMDH). Unlike protest movements in other Arab states, M20 has maintained its call for “reform” rather than for the “overthrow” of the regime and has not questioned the monarchy as such. The movement has asked for a democratic constitution, the independence of the judiciary and the media, as well as the separation of wealth and political power to leave the politics of a rentier economy and the monopolization of resources behind.

In reaction to the M20's demands, the monarchy adopted a series of reforms in the political, social and economic fields – prominently announced in the King's speech on March 9, 2011, in which he promised constitutional reform and professed his willingness to relinquish parts of his powers. Accordingly, the King appointed a royal committee to be in charge of drafting a new constitution. It was adopted by referendum in July 2011 and promoted by the official media as providing for a democratic system. It was also supported by major political parties, which have developed an alliance with the Palace based on common interests over the years.

In the new constitution, human rights and political freedoms have been expanded. Amazigh, the language of the country's Berber-speaking population, has been recognized as an official language. The legislative and oversight powers of Parliament have been broadened and the competencies of the government enhanced. The judiciary has been granted more independence. A Higher Judicial Council has been established and its prerogatives have been extended to include missions of investigation. Another novelty of the text is the constitutionalization of existing regulatory bodies that aim at implementing principles of good governance, transparency and equality, such as the Competition Council, created in 2009, or the establishment of new ones, such as the Authority in Charge of Parity and Fighting All Forms of Discrimination. (For more details on the constitutional reform, see SWP Comments 30/2012 by Amin Alsaden, <http://bit.ly/SWP12C30>.)

The reforms certainly brought improvements in certain areas, in particular with regards to enshrining human rights. Yet, the constitutional reform did not establish the proclaimed parliamentary monarchy but rather maintained the “executive monarchy,” in which the King retains significant powers over strategic issues, such as matters related to religion and security. The King can still dissolve Parliament and dismiss ministers, and he chairs the Council of Ministers when strategic issues are discussed. He is the head of the Supreme Judicial Council and the newly created National Security Council, and he remains the supreme arbiter among political actors.

In parallel to the constitutional reform, other measures were adopted. Early legislative elections were held in November 2011. A few weeks later, a coalition government led by the Islamist PJD, which had received a plurality of votes, was formed. However, with a decrease in societal pressures following the adoption of the new constitution, the regime put the reform process on hold. The elections for the Upper House of Parliament, which were to take place in the fall of October 2012 at the latest, have not been organized as of yet. Whether the reason behind this delay is the regime’s fear of another success of the PJD at the local and regional levels, concerns over a potentially low voter turnout or the official argument given that the Moroccan “model of regionalization” has not been completed yet, the deferral shows that there is not enough will on the part of the monarchy and political parties to translate some of the provisions of the new constitution into reality. The same goes for the adoption of 20 “organic laws,” that is, laws that define the procedures to establish regulatory bodies and some of the new institutions, as stipulated in the constitution. So far, only four organic laws have been adopted. The slow pace in the adoption of organic laws shows that there is no urgency in establishing transparency and accountability.

Government’s reform initiatives

The PJD-led government has launched important reform initiatives, such as a dialogue on the reform of the judiciary system. It has also introduced measures aimed at fighting corruption and establishing professional conduct in the public service, and it has made the reform of a costly system of subsidies one of its priorities. However, the government – and more specifically the PJD – does not have the clout to put pressure on the monarchical institution to implement these reforms.

In fact, over the past two years, the PJD has supported most of the King’s moves for the purpose of normalizing its presence within the formal political sphere and building trust with the monarchy. This in itself constrains the performance of the new government and its capacity to tackle reform issues directly. In this regard, the PJD’s attempts at fighting corruption are a significant example. Corruption is widespread in the country, where wealth and political power are highly concentrated and the political system functions based on what analysts have described as “endemic corruption,” that is, different forms of material benefits that are granted to both the political and the military elites. In this system, the monarchy’s business interests are widespread in different sectors that range from food distribution and cement production to phosphate mining and the services sector. The government has little power to address the endemic corruption in the political regime. Sending high-ranking officials involved in corruption to prison, such as Khalid Alioua, the former head of Real Estate and Hotel Loans (Crédit Immobilier and Hôtelier – CIH), for example, is more of a symbolic act than a reform measure. In addition, Alioua was released in March 2013 without being sentenced.

The current government also has little substantive political authority to tackle other structural reform issues. In July 2013, it was confronted with a crisis after one of the coalition parties close to the Palace, the Istiqlal Party, withdrew its ministers from

the government. Although the reasons behind the governmental crisis remain unclear, it shows that the head of government, Abdelilah Benkirane, is at the mercy of other coalition partners who can be instrumentalized by the regime as part of its strategy to undermine the PJD. Keeping the head of government busy with such a crisis – instead of allowing him to focus his energies on pushing forward the reform process – might also be part of a regime strategy to curb the PJD's performance and its capacity to respond to the high expectations of the Moroccans. (For more details on the PJD-led government and its relations with the Palace, see SWP Comments 6/2014 by Mohammed Masbah, <http://bit.ly/SWP14C06>.)

Acquiescent political elites

The reforms over the last two years have been accompanied by changes in the composition of political elites. These changes have mostly amounted to a rotation of influential figures within the core elite around the King. Thus, while the government and Parliament have indeed seen a renewal in personnel, there are no signs of significant changes in the relationship between the monarchy and the political elites: The renewal of the latter has not gone hand in hand with the elites changing their attitudes vis-à-vis the central power and political practices. Rather, recent developments in Morocco have shown that elite rotation and renewal serve mainly to maintain the monarchy's dominance and continuity, and that there is a persistent pattern of acquiescence by the elites.

Indeed, a significant number of the political elites have been blind supporters of all initiatives stemming from the monarchical institution. This can be explained by the clientelist networks that the monarchy has created over the years, in which economic self-interest has become one of the elites' shared values, thus providing the regime with a reservoir of loyalists. These loyal elites are to be found among so-called technocrats close to the Palace, but also

among the business elites, high-level officials in local administration, the army, the religious establishment and mainstream political parties. More recently, leading civil society actors, former leftist oppositionists, and intellectuals have been drawn into these networks. They constitute a new pool for cooptation by – and legitimization of – the regime.

The royal cabinet's new configuration

During 2011, the monarch doubled the number of his advisors from six to twelve. The royal cabinet was reinforced first through the appointments of Abdellatif Menouni, El Mustapha Sahel and Omar Aziman. All of them have extensive experience in serving the regime and are known for their expertise, rigor, credibility and loyalty to the *Makhzan*, that is, the monarchy and the central state apparatus. Then, as the head of government was forming his cabinet, the King simultaneously appointed three new advisors. The most surprising – and contested – appointment was that of Fouad Ali El-Himma, a classmate of the King, former Minister of Interior and the Palace's man for political and security issues.

El-Himma had been criticized by different opposition parties, be it the PJD or the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), for his interference with and manipulation of the political party scene through the establishment of the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) in August 2008. The M20 had asked for El-Himma's resignation and withdrawal from the political sphere because he was widely perceived as a symbol of political corruption. El-Himma's appointment thus was a clear signal that the monarchy was not willing to let the people decide or influence who should be included in or excluded from the close circles of decision-making.

Most of the newcomers to the royal cabinet, all highly educated, have been in charge of strategic files – with the extra-constitutional royal cabinet serving as a

“shadow government.” Indeed, there is no legal framework that determines the functions, missions and the relationship of the royal cabinet vis-à-vis other state institutions. Very often, the King’s advisors intervene directly in issues that fall under the domain of the government and for which they cannot be held accountable. The lack of clarity regarding the roles and competencies of the royal cabinet and the government poses serious problems in terms of accountability.

This has become particularly evident in what has been referred to as “Daniel Gate.” Due to massive popular outrage, the King in August 2013 revoked his decision to grant amnesty to Daniel Galván Viña, a Spanish pedophile convicted by a Moroccan court of raping 11 children. The Palace said in a communiqué that “the King was never informed, in any way or at any time, of the seriousness of the abject crimes of which the person concerned was convicted.” The PJD Minister of Justice, Mustapha Ramid, had, however, declared earlier that the Palace had indeed been informed and that the decision of pardon was motivated by “national interests” and “friendly relations” with Spain. An investigative report published by the independent news website *Lakome* mentioned the involvement of the King’s advisor El-Himma in drawing up the list of the 48 Spanish prisoners who were granted pardon, among them Daniel Galván. Although the constitution grants the King the right to pardon prisoners on specific occasions, preparing the lists is the responsibility of the government. This is but one example of ill-defined competencies creating ambiguities that are not conducive for good governance, but rather provide the monarchy with a sphere for manipulation, allowing it to escape accountability.

The PJD-led government

The preeminence of the monarchy and the prevention of most of the initiatives undertaken by PJD ministers have been apparent

since the early phases of government formation. When asked by the King in November 2011 to form the cabinet, Benkirane, as the leader of the party that had won a plurality of seats, had no choice but to put aside ideological differences and join forces with other political parties, both from secular-socialist and centrist-royalist orientations. Among the thirty ministers and deputy ministers, eleven portfolios went to the PJD, six to the Istiqlal Party, three to the Popular Movement, two to the Constitutional Union and two to the Party of Progress and Socialism. Although the majority of ministers have a political affiliation, there are also six “technocrats” close to the *Makhzan*. The latter were appointed to strategic portfolios such as religious affairs, national defense and the general secretariat of the government, that is, the department in charge of drafting most of the laws.

With the October 2013 government reshuffle, after Istiqlal had left and the National Rally of Independents joined the coalition, the number of ministerial portfolios increased from 30 to 38. Major changes included an increase in the number of female ministers (from one to six) and of “technocrats” appointed to strategically important departments, such as the interior and national education, thus bringing in new faces and, at the same time, allowing the regime to maintain control over strategic ministries.

The PJD’s margin for maneuver has thus remained very limited. The party has opted for a non-confrontational approach, and its leader has tended to be compliant vis-à-vis the monarch. Whatever the motives behind the PJD’s behavior – pragmatic or tactical – it is likely to turn out to be a risky business. Recent experiences have shown that the participation of opposition forces in the established institutional framework has contributed toward their being discredited vis-à-vis their social basis. For example, this was the case with the USFP in 1997, when, while leading the government, the socialist party allowed for a smooth transition of power between the two monarchs, Hassan

II (1961–1999) and Mohamed VI (1999–present), rather than push for a democratic opening.

The political practices, norms, symbolic rituals and general submissiveness of the elites have remained largely the same. Yet, in August 2013, a young Member of Parliament, Adil Tchikitou, from the conservative Istiqlal Party, refused to take part in the annual ceremony of allegiance because he objected to the practice of bowing to the King, which, in his words, “reflects a slave-master relationship.” During the ceremony of allegiance, all representatives of state institutions, elected bodies and tribes bow to the King and – apart from some leading human rights organizations such as the AMDH or the M20 – the majority of the political elites do not question or criticize this practice. Thus, Tchikitou’s act has been an exception to the rule.

Weakened mobilization

The reaction of the Moroccan regime to the demands of the M20 vacillated between the adoption of reforms, attempts at co-optation, intimidation and repression. The regime has allowed peaceful demonstrations to take place, but it has occasionally used violence to repress protests in cities such as Rabat, Casablanca, Tangiers, Agadir and Safi. For instance, a sit-in organized on May 15, 2011, in front of the clandestine Temara detention center was violently repressed. Activists such as Kamal El Omari from the city of Safi died in May 2011 as a result of injuries inflicted by the police. In addition, the official media covered the activities of the M20 in a biased way, and activists were very often represented as a source of instability. Some of the leading figures of the M20, such as Oussama El Khlifi, have been – successfully – invited to join the regime party, PAM. All these strategies combined have contributed to the weakening of the movement and of its capacity to mobilize around its main demands. Also, many Moroccans have been willing to wait and see what the reforms

would bring rather than continue to protest. They have also had an eye on social upheavals in the region. With the instability and violence that have characterized countries such as Egypt and Syria, many Moroccans have been reluctant to mobilize for regime change.

Organizational shortcomings and the lack of a unifying issue to mobilize Moroccans were also factors in diminishing the influence of the M20. During the first months of the movement, internal divisions between secular activists as well as the growing and visible presence of members of the anti-regime Islamists of al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan affected its capacity to build consensus and to mobilize. But when al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan suspended its support to the M20 in December 2011, that led to a decreasing number of protestors in the streets. More importantly, during the protests, actors from civil society organizations, Islamists, youth movements and professional groups expressed mainly narrow sectoral demands and had divergent expectations of the state. For instance, university professors, medical nurses and Imams all demanded that the state increase their salaries and/or improve their working conditions, but they organized their demonstrations and sit-ins separately and in parallel to those organized by the M20. This prevented them from “connecting the dots” and unifying around particular reform issues. The groups lacked the solidarity necessary for exerting real pressure for change. Thus, rather than being confronted by a unified movement pushing for substantial change, the regime was faced by a heterogeneous conglomerate of loosely connected actors pursuing partial demands, and therefore it was able to deal with – and either pacify or repress – one at a time.

Still, although the regime has been successful in weakening the M20, Morocco has witnessed continual protests over the past two years. Moroccans continue to organize sit-ins, demonstrations and to sign petitions to express their disenchantment with state policies when their political, social and eco-

conomic rights are at stake. Morocco is confronted with many of the problems that have led to revolts and instability in other countries of the region. The country has a high rate of youth unemployment (30% of Morocco's urban youth are unemployed); problems stemming from corruption at all levels; largely discredited political institutions, as different surveys have demonstrated; and an image crisis at the level of the political parties, which is linked, among other factors, to the lack of internal democracy.

Without addressing these deficits, the monarchical regime might be challenged by social groups that are less peaceful than the demonstrators who are currently calling for a real constitutional monarchy. The mobilization of thousands of Moroccans in August 2013 against the King's amnesty for Daniel Galván shows that the eruption of social unrest can be surprising and unforeseeable – as was the case in Tunisia in 2010 in reaction to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation. It also shows the willingness of people to contest even the decisions made by the monarch when they feel that their dignity has been trampled on.

Moreover, although the regime dominates the political process and has been able to domesticate most of its political elites – apart from opposition forces such as al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan and some leftist political parties – it has little control over changing attitudes among the people and their behavior. Two factors play a role here. Firstly, alternative social media have been challenging the official views in a variety of ways. In this new public sphere, more and more Moroccans have been engaging in counter-discourses to the top-down reform process. Secondly, the overall trend of decreasing participation in legislative and local elections between 1993 and 2007 is an indicator of a rising political awareness as well as of changing attitudes vis-à-vis the state. In 2011, only 45 percent of registered voters went to the polls, whereas in 1993 the turnout was some 63 percent.

Loosely organized social movements will remain an important driving force for change and a major challenge to the regime. For instance, M20 activists have already started to organize differently and mobilize against different issues, such as sexual harassment. They have raised civic and political awareness among the people by producing videos and posting them on the net. In addition, new initiatives such as “*Une heure de lecture*,” which consists of inviting young people to gather in a public space, read an article or parts of a book and then debate them, have started to take place. These new forms of engaging in the public sphere are, in fact, a nuisance to the regime. In November 2013, the police stopped young people from gathering and reading in Casablanca. Despite the regime having extensive experience in dealing with formal and informal opposition groups – be they from the left or from the Islamist currents – it will likely face difficulties in dealing with ideologically heterogeneous and leaderless movements.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Moroccan regime has shown its reluctance to introduce genuine reform unless there are internal and external pressures that put its interests at stake. If in the 1990s the late King was keen on ensuring a peaceful monarchical transition and portraying an image of a democratizing Morocco, recent regional dynamics and societal pressures have put a significant strain on the current King to introduce constitutional reforms. Yet, the regime has remained faithful to its homeopathic manner as well as its approach of keeping tight control over the reform process, thus preventing any structural changes or significant reductions in the powers of the monarch.

Yet, if the regime does not deliver, especially in the social and economic fields, gradualism that does not provide for substantive change might create frustration and implant the seeds of social unrest, violence and radicalization. Although it is

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difficult to gauge the degree of satisfaction among the general public with regards to recent reforms, due to the absence of reliable opinion polls, the persistent social mobilization around various social, economic and political issues shows that the expectations are high and that, in the current conjuncture, the regime is having a difficult time responding to the growing list of demands, not least due to the scarcity of material resources.

The only things that will stabilize Morocco in the medium and long term are consistent and profound structural reforms. The country could well become a regional model for peaceful change if the regime alters its approach to change. What is needed is a break with a number of entrenched political practices, in particular the absence of accountability, transparency and the dual and ambiguous nature of ruling between the head of the state (the King) and the head of government. Here, new rules and principles need to be established to govern the relations between the monarchy, political elites and social forces. In this context, competencies should be directly linked with accountability. As the 2011 constitution recognizes this principle – which the King has been emphasizing in many of his speeches – it should be applied to all political actors. If the monarchy aspires to be a constitutional one, it should be subject to the law and politically accountable. The EU and its member states should encourage the monarchy to go exactly in that direction.

Actually, such an approach would complement European-Moroccan relations: In 2008 the EU elevated its relations with Morocco to an “advanced status,” while the kingdom committed itself to an advanced and measurable level of political, social and economic reforms. So far, this has not translated into the regime adopting structural political reforms aimed at increased accountability and popular participation. Yet, European pressure could have an accelerating effect on Morocco’s reform process.

More importantly, in a regional context characterized by renewed authoritarian rule (Egypt) and massive instability, there is a concrete danger of Morocco sliding backwards, especially in the fields of human rights and the rule of law. Europe should act so as to prevent Morocco from backtracking on reforms already decided upon or from abandoning the reform path altogether for the sake of a misled stability. The new constitution sets out a list of rights, such as the right of access to information, the implementation of which will depend on laws regulating the procedures to be adopted by a Parliament that is largely under the control of the monarchy. Thus, certain rights run the risk of being diluted by such laws. The EU should keep a close watch on such developments. It should also upgrade its programs for reinforcing the capacities of political institutions, such as the Parliament and independent political parties, and lend more support to empower civil society organizations with political watchdog functions.