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No Rivals to the King

The Limits to Political Reform in Morocco's "Enlightened Authoritarianism"

Isabelle Werenfels and Ilyas Saliba

In Morocco it is still the king who defines the boundaries of political discourse and action. The palace is increasingly placing obstacles in the path of its strongest adversary, the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD). This was seen most recently in the difficult and protracted coalition negotiations following the October 2016 parliamentary elections. At the same time, pressure on civil society critics is steadily intensifying. The inherent promise of political reform in Morocco's comparatively inclusive model is increasingly eroding and gradually substituted with the promise of economic modernisation, potentially undermining the very bases of the kingdom's domestic stability. It is thus also in Europe's interests for Morocco to uphold the progress it has achieved through the political reforms of recent decades.

On March 15th 2017, King Mohammed VI of Morocco withdrew Abdelilah Benkirane's mandate to form a new government. In the five months since October 2016 the popular serving prime minister and PJD leader had failed to establish a viable coalition. Due to the election results he would have needed support from parties close to the palace. Yet the king's chosen replacement, PJD stalwart and former foreign minister Saadeddine El Othmani, succeeded in breaking the deadlock within just a few days. This suggests that the "palace" – the king and his patronage network of advisors, business elites, bureaucrats and "royalist parties" – had been working to rid itself of its increasingly troublesome adversary.

The PJD increased its parliamentary representation under Benkirane, remaining

ahead of the royalist Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM). The PJD also did well in the 2015 local and regional elections. As prime minister, Benkirane pulled off the delicate balancing act of cutting subsidies without it leading to major protests, but he occasionally deviated from the king's line by criticising Russia's role in Syria and condemning the king's entourage for clinging on to their privileges and preserving their hegemonic role in politics and the economy. Benkirane's rise and preliminary fall demonstrate that the Moroccan system, where the constitution makes the king both "Commander of the Faithful" and head of state, has no room for a second charismatic leader.

However, under the 2011 constitutional reform, the king must choose a representa-

tive of the strongest party to form a government. Hence, the palace had little choice but to integrate the PJD. As an experienced diplomat and intellectual, the new prime minister Saadeddine El Othmani is the antithesis of Benkirane, whose popularity is rooted in his ability to communicate with the “ordinary people”. Othmani, regarded as reserved and consensus-seeking, made major concessions to the palace to establish his coalition.

Tight Constraints on Competition

The PJD holds none of the key ministries in its new government, which is a coalition including several pro-palace technocratic ministers in addition to three conservative royalist parties – the National Rally of Independents (RNI), the Popular Movement (MP) and the Constitutional Union (UC) – and two left-wing parties loyal to the palace: the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). The recently founded royalist PAM, which came second in the parliamentary elections, and the liberal nationalist Istiqlal together form the opposition. In this constellation, the PJD is now even more strongly fenced in by pro-palace forces in the formal political institutions. Moreover, with the socialist-secular USFP a traditionally anti-Islamist party is part of the new PJD-led government. The king’s intervention and the inclusion of anti-islamist heavyweights in the government coalition is causing substantial friction within the PJD, and is undermining Othmani’s internal support.

So why is the PJD still playing along, given that the palace has worked persistently since 2012 to weaken it? The regional political climate in the Middle East and North Africa certainly plays an important role. The military coup against Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 set off a witch-hunt against the Muslim Brotherhood and those perceived closed to it. The PJD, though not targeted directly, has responded by working even harder to normalize its relations with palace and the

established political actors. The PJD is well aware that it would be able to achieve little for its supporters in opposition, and thus credible opposition would be politically costly. Any fundamental criticism of the king’s dominant role in the state and the economy prompts state harassment and repression. This is evident, for example, in the discriminatory treatment of members of the – officially unrecognised – Islamist movement Al Adl Wal Ihsane.

But the palace also has an interest in keeping the PJD on board, as the moderate Islamist party plays a crucial role in stabilising the political system by including the religiously conservative echelons of society within the existing institutions. This likely prevents individual radicalisation due to the party’s reach and strong organisational cohesion. The PJD’s effective mobilisation of its supporters also ensures electoral turnout levels that are at least halfway acceptable; this is important to maintain a democratic appearance. As such, the PJD boosts the national and international legitimacy of Moroccan institutions.

Moreover, the party’s liberal economic policies satisfy the needs of the palace, which is the country’s central economic actor. The reductions in fuel and gas subsidies implemented by the PJD during the last parliament are part of a palace strategy of budget consolidation and concessions in the face of long-standing demands by international donors. In other words, here the PJD helped the palace to implement an unpopular project. This is symptomatic of the “division of labour” established by the palace in the Moroccan system.

The Moroccan Model

While the elected government is responsible for the daily business of government, the palace controls all matters of strategic importance: religion, foreign policy, and defence and security, as well as migration policy and energy and infrastructure. The palace maintains absolute authority over all aspects relating to the Western Sahara

conflict, which continues to determine the king's domestic and foreign policy priorities.

In recent years, the palace has been able to achieve visible progress in almost all the aforementioned strategic areas. Morocco obtained membership of the African Union in January 2017 despite Algerian and South African objections, and it is garnering growing African support for its annexation of Western Sahara. The palace has also scored recent successes with its renewable energy expansion, cooptation of leading Salafists into the political system, and a migration policy, which is creating laws and structures for immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Morocco.

Compared with other states in the Middle East and North Africa, Morocco enjoys a high degree of political inclusion and stability. In conjunction with the domestic and foreign policy successes mentioned above, it is no surprise that Europe regards Morocco's "enlightened authoritarianism" as a broad success and a captivating alternative to the Tunisian democratisation model. Most importantly it appears to guarantee stability, contrasting sharply with Libya's descent into civil war, Egypt's repressive military regime and Algeria's unpredictable authoritarianism. What is often overlooked is that the Moroccan model is encountering growing pressures, due to demographic and socio-economic developments – and in response is becoming increasingly less inclusive.

The Limits of Inclusion

It is unclear to what extent this model of governance will prove workable in the foreseeable future. A series of protests shook Morocco in 2016: against education reforms, for better public services, and in October 2016 after police involvement in the gruesome death of a fishmonger in Al Hoceïma, a town in Morocco's neglected Rif region. Anger over the latter incident spread across the whole country and forced the king to order an inquiry. Nevertheless, protests in

the Rif continued throughout the spring of 2017. As disparate and singular as these protests appear, their structural causes are similar: lack of reforms, rampant corruption, and socio-economic grievances, especially very high youth unemployment levels.

Even if the growing protests are not going to topple the monarchy, they point to grievances undermining what has to date been an adaptable and functioning system. Increasing repression and simultaneous marginalisation in institutional processes are creating growing incentives for reform-minded forces and civil society activists to bring their supporters onto the streets. Popular confidence in the elected institutions is evaporating in the face of repeated palace interventions, as exemplified by the choice of prime minister.

By ostentatiously displaying its power over the PJD, the palace is walking a fine line: what is intended as controlled weakening of the party may result in completely discrediting it vis-à-vis its constituency. In doing so, the palace undermines the system's inclusiveness and may push disgruntled PJD-followers toward groups outside the formal political system.

In 2011, as Arab dictators fell and Moroccans also took to the streets to voice their grievances, King Mohammed initiated political reforms to give people an outlet for their anger. But since 2012 the palace has increasingly met protests with repression. Regime-critical civil society actors, such as independent human rights groups, find themselves on a tighter leash, with counter-terrorism frequently serving as an excuse to curtail liberties. Academics, journalists and activists experience intimidation, while expulsions of foreign journalists, activists and organisations are on the rise. For some years, local and international observers have been reporting growing infringements of political and civil liberties in Morocco.

With the new constitution of 2011, the king made a political promise of reforms that has only partially been fulfilled. Although progress has been made on decentralisa-

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tion, elected institutions and the courts have gained little additional authority and autonomy. In fact, signs from the palace suggest a retrenchment of the political reform process. Hardliners apparently regret the constitutional concessions, such as decentralisation, judicial independence, the strengthening of parliament and the appointment of the prime minister from the ranks of the strongest party.

There are indications that the palace is increasingly moving away from the Moroccan model of enlightened authoritarianism. Under this model the monarchy has opted for inclusion and cooptation of a steadily growing spectrum of actors into the formal political process since the late 1990s, while in parallel gradually reducing repression. In doing so, it managed to successfully safeguard the stability of both state and regime. The palace's more recent initiatives are concerned less with promises of political reform; instead they prioritise modernisation with headline-grabbing infrastructure projects such as high-speed rail and gigantic solar power plants.

All this poses the question whether the palace may be moving towards a less inclusive "developmental dictatorship" model that justifies a lack of political and civil rights as the price for progress in modernisation and the prospect of a rising standard of living. This would fit not only with the nature of the palace's domestic political interventionism, but also with the country's investment partnership with China and its growth-led turn to the African continent.

Options for Europe

Internal developments in Morocco are highly relevant to Europe for obvious reasons, as they are related to European key concerns, namely counter-terrorism and migration. The preservation of the inclusive and stabilising Moroccan model is consequently in Europe's interest. Brussels' diplomatic relations with Rabat, however, have been at a nadir since 2015, when a European Court

ruled that the agreement on trade in agricultural and fishery products between the EU and Morocco cannot apply to Western Sahara (a position confirmed by a European Court of Justice ruling in late 2016). Rabat's outrage over the ruling further narrowed the EU's already modest options for influencing developments within Morocco.

Nonetheless, foreign policy actors in the EU and its member states must not close their eyes to developments in Morocco. A modernisation project that comes with shrinking political spaces is unlikely to preserve domestic stability in the long term. Hence, it makes little sense to measure Morocco's reform process and stability against prevailing regional conditions and to praise it as a shining example of democracy and human rights. Instead problematic developments, such as reprisals against regime critics, must be pointed out.

Given the EU Commission's 160 million euros in budget aid in 2016 and running development projects with a volume of over a billion euros, Europe is not an irrelevant player in Morocco. Still, it is questionable whether strengthening political conditionality in the current situation would have positive effects on the transformation process or the human rights situation. However, making (pre-emptory) concessions, such as ending cooperation with critics of the palace, would send the wrong message as well.

Instead European support for civil society actors, elected bodies and executive institutions not directly controlled by the palace needs to be stepped up, in order to strengthen the independence and credibility of democratically elected institutions. In the longer term, such support could have a positive influence on the stalled political reform process and contribute to ongoing stability. The existence of a political counterweight to the palace is the best guarantee that Morocco will find its way back onto the road to political reform and expand inclusion once again.