

Morocco's silent revolution¹

by **Valentina Bartolucci**



The last few weeks of 2011 were critical for democracy in the Middle East, as illustrated by developments in a number of countries. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh signed an agreement to give up power, though he has yet to deliver on this repeated pledge; in Bahrain, the government accepted the findings of a frank report on human rights; in Egypt, thousands of people demonstrated to reclaim their revolution; and in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco,

parliamentary elections were held - the first since the wave of protests that began to sweep the Arab world in December 2010.

Morocco's experience in the context of these region-wide trends has been as distinctive as that of any other Arab country. In 2011, Morocco too was characterised by popular protests demanding governmental changes and constitutional reforms (see "[The Moroccan exception, and a king's speech](#)", 11 March 2011 on Open Democracy).

But subsequent events showed once more that Morocco, even within north Africa, has a singular political character. The most obvious external aspect of this is that the country is a monarchy; and in the aftermath of the protests - and in contrast to other rulers who responded to demonstrations with force - Morocco's king, Mohammed VI, quickly promised constitutional reforms. A new constitution was proposed, and endorsed on 1 July 2011 in a referendum.

Under the new constitution, the king is now obliged to appoint the prime minister from the majority party in parliament. Yet he retains ultimate authority: via control over the military apparatus and the religious establishment, the power to implement emergency laws, and the capacity to veto new laws and ministerial appointments.

This process and results reflect Morocco's distinctiveness, in three ways. First, the king remains very popular among the general public and is widely believed to act as the guarantor of political stability and social cohesion, and arbitrator between opposed factions. The consequence is that very few people in the country want to depose the king or seek outright revolution. Rather, Moroccans are more inclined to seek gradual change continuous with the country's history and religious values. Second, this path of change itself follows the democratic reforms - of the family code, of

¹ Originally published on *Open Democracy*, 17 January 2012.

the religious sector, and of justice - that have occurred in Morocco since Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in 1999.

Third, the king's strategic approach has been able to defuse the ostensible threat of violent groups resorting to a violent jihad, in a way that has won praise from western observers (see Nelcya Delanoe, "[Morocco: a journey in the space between monarchy and Islamism](#)", 5 February 2003 on Open Democracy). This strategy reinforces the sense that Moroccans are both devoted to their king and in their vast majority deeply hostile to violence.

The political process

The parliamentary elections held on 25 November 2011 were a test of whether the king's approach of gradual reforms was still popular in the country. The Islamist PJD (Party of Justice and Development) - for long been perceived by Moroccans and international observers alike as the only credible political party in the country - was the victor. This indicated that those who sought real change in the country wanted this to be achieved within the system by more effective reforms, not through revolts (see Laila Lalami, "[Morocco's Moderate Revolution](#)", *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2011).

The PJD owed its victory to four factors. First, it focused its campaign not on issues such as the banning of alcohol or women's headscarves, but on a strong anti-corruption programme with detailed policy proposals - on, for example, delivering good governance and social justice, fighting endemic corruption, revamping the country's abysmal education system, and improving people's economic condition.

Second, its connecting theme was a call for dignity, which - backed by good organisation, grassroots networks, and motivated candidates - attracted many people who saw the Islamists as a means to escape a sense of subjugation by the west.

Third, the party benefited from the fact that the push for change in Morocco had discredited political parties closely associated with the status quo, such as the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (formed by a friend of the king). Fourth, the PJD was able to assure the middle class that it was not totally "Islamist" but rather had an "Islamic reference" that linked Islam with political dignity.

The PJD's breakthrough was the culmination of a long period when its image had provoked elements of fear as well as hope. The party had in recent years moderated its tone and compromised on matters such as the reform of the family code (which it had initially opposed) and a stringent anti-terrorism law passed in the aftermath of the Casablanca bombings in May 2003. After later attacks, the PJD had been obliged to reiterate its total opposition to any form of violence, absolute repudiation of terrorism, and its open and peaceful character.

The monarchy played an important role in this process: both in encouraging Islamists who oppose violence and support the monarchy to participate in the political game (thus making it easier for the palace to exercise influence over it - to the extent that PJD members are known as "the Islamists of the palace"), and in cracking down on adherents

of the Salafist ideology. Yet some still fear that an internal takeover of the PJD would lead to the radicalisation of Moroccan society.

This perception prompted the PJD's secretary-general Abdelilah Benkirane to stress that the party will neither infringe personal liberties nor dictate to Moroccans how to behave, and to state that its chief concern is to improve the country socially and economically. Benkirane's first public statement after the election declared: "Religion belongs in the mosques and we are not going to interfere in people's personal lives."

The promise of change

Morocco's political development in 2011, including the holding of parliamentary elections and the victory of the Islamist party, shows that even in a constrained setting there is hope for those seeking real and sustainable change while working within the system. Yet outstanding issues and challenges remain. Just before the election, the youth-led movement "February 20", some left-wing parties and the outlawed Justice & Charity movement founded by Sheikh Yassine called for a boycott and organised demonstrations in all major cities.

The boycott demand was countered by government encouragement to vote by poster campaigns and televised announcements; in the event more than 45% of eligible voters cast their ballots, but there was also a high number of spoiled ballots, which may represent another form of protest against the status quo (and, perhaps, that there is less fear than in the past about committing such an act).

Overall, the parliamentary elections of 25 November 2011 contain signs of progress. They demonstrate that Moroccans want radical change and that such change can emerge from inside the system. Moroccans suffer from the same problems as do others across the Arab world - endemic corruption, poor housing, widespread poverty, social inequality, and increasing unemployment. Yet, unlike their counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere they will probably not go down the path of revolution.

Here, the PJD and the coalition government it leads - formed on 3 January 2012, and headed by Abdelilah Benkirane - could play a crucial role. Morocco is presently on the threshold of profound social, political and economic transformation. If the new government can assume more ownership of the political process, disaffected Moroccans may find new hope in the system.

But in order to fulfill this hope, the PJD faces two big issues. First, it must ensure that the governing coalition is a strong one, able to ensure that it is not over-constrained by the previous rules of the palace. Second, the PJD must demonstrate that it is willing to work within the system, thus reassuring worried observers that it is able to compromise and to maintain the country's diversity and liberal lifestyle. The signs here are mixed.

Morocco remains unique among the countries affected by the "Arab spring": ruled by a monarch who is not a dictator and is supported by the great majority of the population, with a government that has been able both to maintain its specificity while maintaining close ties with Europe and the United States. This context helps explain the character of the

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authorities' reaction to demonstrations and disaffection. Its elections suggested that real internal change - even a silent revolution - is possible. The events of 2012 will to a great degree show how far that hope can be realised.