

## The Arab Spring and the Moroccan (r)evolution

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The Arab world is in a state of turmoil. Only a few weeks ago, a young Tunisian lit a match which set the Arab world on fire. The self-immolation of a desperate young man in the town of Sidi Bouzid not only led to the downfall of President Ben Ali, but also managed to inspire and mobilise hundreds of thousands across North Africa and the Middle East in what is now known as the “Arab Spring”. The quest is for freedom and dignity, the influence is the Internet, and the means are

peaceful revolts and self-immolation. While revolts have now spread to Egypt, Iran, Bahrain and Libya, signs of unrest are also coming from the quiet Morocco.

The demand for changes began with the creation on Facebook of the online movement for “Freedom and Democracy Now” calling for a national demonstration to take place on February 20, 2011 in several towns all around the country. At the same time, a video was posted on YouTube carefully describing various issues affecting Morocco – widespread illiteracy, marginalisation, poverty and corruption – and calling for a change of the government and constitutional reforms. Very quickly, several individuals and groups have become engaged in spreading the message inviting people to demonstrate – a call listened by thousands of Moroccans. A counter-movement asking not to demonstrate “for the love of the king” was also created, initiating a fierce cyberwar on the Web.

Why then Morocco is not addressed in the wider Western debates on the Arab change? Morocco though is facing tremendous issues – deeply entrenched corruption, very high unemployment levels, a restricted press, and some of the greatest discrepancies of wealth in the Arab world. Furthermore, the question around the disputed sovereignty over the Western Sahara remains unresolved and the Islamists still are the “big unknown”. Finally, like millions of people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, Moroccans too demand for greater democracy and radical reforms. Anger over poverty, in particular, is simmering in Morocco, where popular protests against the high cost of living and unemployment occur regularly. Nevertheless, Morocco is radically different from the rest of the Arab world on many respects.

First, at this stage it looks like no one in Morocco calls for outright revolution. No one openly wants to depose the king, Mohammed VI, widely believed to act as arbiter between opposed factions and as the guarantor of political stability and social cohesion. What people

generally demand is rather constitutional reforms, higher governmental transparency, less corruption and a limitation of the powers of the king – not his abdication. Second, the king has a unique status condensed in the formula *amir al muminine* (Commander of the Faithful) that makes of him both the highest political and religious authority, ultimately untouchable – being considered to be the descendent of the Prophet Muhammed himself. Third, with the coming of Mohammed VI, Morocco has already (slowly) embarked in its own revolution consisting in the implementation of a plan for democratisation accompanied by an all series of gradual reforms (among which the reform of the *Moudawana*).

Hughes wrote that, soon after his ascension, king Mohammed VI “impressed many with his willingness to listen, his interest in advanced technology, his relaxed manner when not surrounded by courtiers, and his sympathetic concern for social betterment of the poor” (Hughes, 2001: 359). His coming brought with it a new hope towards a real democratisation and his attention towards social issues made him earn the nickname “king of the poor”. The popularity of the king has been accompanied by a winning strategic approach toward the politicised Islam, something that has also won praise from western observers. Finally, Morocco is still widely considered to be “exceptional” within the Arab world – people are believed to be “moderate” Muslims, peaceful, generally devoted to their king and, while calling for reforms, deeply hostile to violence.

A sense of unease, however, can be felt in Morocco. Signs of unrest emerge from within the monarchy itself (by Moulay Hicham, cousin of the king) and more and more Moroccans are demanding radical reforms. Moreover, the widely acclaimed *exceptionnalité Marocaine* had already been reconsidered in the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca attacks – even more shocking for the presumed total extraneousness of Morocco from terrorism. Other big unknowns include the high number of demoralised youths that are left with little other than dreaming for a 12 miles-away Eldorado (the inaccessible fortress Europe); the growing unpopularity of the governmental elite (seen as separate from the person of the king); the challenge of a growing Islamist movement (in particular the illegal but tolerated *Al adl wal Ihsane*); the thorny issue of the Western Sahara; and the growing inequality affecting the Moroccan populace.

A recent visit to Morocco confirmed in me the view that Morocco is not moving towards a revolution but rather a gradual evolution led by its popular king. To be sure, thousands of Moroccans did (largely peacefully) demonstrate on February, 20th asking for radical reforms. Morocco has also recently experienced its first case of self-immolation by a young man that burnt himself in Benguerir after having lost his job. Similarly, several Twitter posts report a worrying declaration by the Moroccan activist Nadia Yassine - “we will have a transition, on a voluntary basis or gained with the force” - a declaration that remains to be validated as the movement she represents has always called for peaceful change.

For all of the above Morocco needs to be kept under observation as the situation can quickly evolve. As suggested by Lalami in an essay for Foreign Policy “there is only so much Moroccans will bear. If the call for evolution is ignored, it could morph into a call for revolution quite quickly” (Lalami, 2011). This is something the monarchy does not ignore.

On March 20th, the king announced to his populace that by the end of June significant changes to the country's political and judicial systems will be proposed – a “comprehensive constitutional reform” that would include the appointment of the prime minister by parliament (rather than by the king); moves to guarantee judicial independence; the introduction of direct elections at the local level; and constitutional amendments that would guarantee more civil as well as gender rights. Despite that, Morocco's claim to be the only Arab country to be taking the shock in its stride has to be validated in the following months.

## **References**

Hughes, S. O., *Morocco Under King Hassan*, Ithaca Press, Reading, 2001.

Lalami, L., “Morocco's Moderate Revolution”, *Foreign Policy*, 21 febbraio 2011.