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# Morocco 2014: The Return of Authoritarianism

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2014 was the third year of the Benkirane administration. The cabinet led by him resulted from the early elections brought on by the 20 February Movement protests (the Moroccan version of the so-called 'Arab' Spring) occurring over the course of 2011. This is the first time in Moroccan history that an Islamist party independent from the monarchy is heading the government. In any case, Benkirane, a moderate conservative leader, only managed to stay at the head of the coalition government during the second half of 2013 by making significant political concessions to the pre-Arab Spring establishment, particularly insofar as sharing power with the royal palace camp. The Arab context (the military coup in Egypt, bloody civil wars bogging down Syria, Libya and Yemen, an unprecedented *anti-change* diplomatic offensive in the very wealthy Saudi Arabia, supported by the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait...) has profoundly shaken the fragile post-Arab Spring political balance in Morocco. The head of government's party, which had won the 25 November 2011 elections with drums beating and trumpets sounding when the Arab Spring euphoria was at its apogee, has thereafter been on the defensive. Despite several attempts during its first year in power, it has thus not managed to carry out its socioeconomic programme, perceived by its supporters as favourable to the poorest sectors, as well as to the struggle against corruption and the rentier economy.

### Stability over Change

In fact, as of the cabinet reshuffle in late 2013 and throughout 2014, the Justice and Development Party

(PJD) heading the coalition seems to have definitively come to terms with royal hegemony over the executive branch. It thus relinquished a *democratic interpretation* of the 2011 Constitution granting the executive branch substantial powers while turning various royal powers – formerly discretionary – into limited powers. After this reshuffle, control over key ministries such as those of the Interior, Foreign Affairs and Education by palace officials has made the little power held by the Prime Minister dwindle even more.

This return to pre-2011 monarchic authoritarianism has been accompanied by an increase in the weight of security agencies in decision-making processes. This is implicitly justified by the real threats to the country by extremist groups, whether loyal to Daesh or al-Qaeda. Some two thousand Moroccans, a large part of them bearing European passports, are participating in the combats in Syria, Iraq and other battlefields such as the Sahel. This regression by Morocco after the democratic progress made in 2011 and 2012 is part, as stated above, of a general regression occurring in all the Arab Spring countries except Tunisia.

The PJD, which had won the early 25 November 2011 election thanks to its slogan for change "*Did-da Al Istibdad wal Fassad!*" (Against despotism and corruption!), now tends to justify the lack of convincing results in the sphere of political and social change by insisting on Morocco's vital need for stability. This concept was recurrent in 2014 in statements by the head of government, who is also the secretary general of the PJD. Such an orientation distances it even more from the forces comprising the backbone of the pro-democratic demonstrations leading to the elections that brought it to power. Indeed, three leftist parties – the Unified Socialist Party (PSU), the Ittihadi National Congress Party (CNI) and the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party (PADS) – formed a federation on 23 March 2014 with a view to fight for a parliamentary regime where the King

would rule without governing. In the same dynamic aiming to bring together all those disappointed by the failure of the 2011 reform promises, some fifty political and civil society leaders met in Rabat on 6 April. Among them were important non-parliamentary leftist leaders such as Mohamed Sassi and Abdellah El Harrif, leaders of the powerful moderate Islamist association, al-Adl Wal Ihsan (AWI), such as Abdelwahed Mutawakkil, as well as activists of the 20 February Movement such as Widad Melhaf and Fouad Abdelmoumni. The aim of the meeting was to explore paths towards entente between religious and secular movements in order to continue action for political change while maintaining civil peace.

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### **The Political Discourse in 2014 Reached an Unprecedented Level of Populism**

The opposition parties in Parliament, consisting primarily of the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), the Istiqlal Party (PI) and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which are, we must keep in mind, close to the palace, continue their scathing criticism of the PJD and its leader. Benkirane's regular and apparently anti-system outbursts before Parliament, in which he attacks the opposition, have gained the population's attention and caused endless verbal sparring matches and polemics but are also a godsend for the head of government. Indeed, Benkirane's popularity is intact in public opinion. The latter increasingly perceives him as someone wishing to do good for his country but foiled by the system's elites, who fear for their interests. The opposition takes advantage of the government's weak results insofar as economic and social reform to attack its head using the same populist register. Thus

Hamid Chabat, the Secretary General of Istiqlal, the most important parliamentary opposition party, accused the leader of PJD of working for Daesh (the Islamic State) and Mossad.

### **Austerity and Social Safety Nets**

Insofar as the economy, the productive machine improved its performance but the Benkirane Administration continued to take austerity measures, such as energy subsidy cuts (a decrease of approximately 20% in public funding allocated to the Compensation Fund, whose official goal is to keep prices of essential commodities to levels affordable to the population). Such measures have had painful consequences on the social level, leading in particular to a rise in the cost of living for the poor and middle classes.

The International Monetary Fund announced that Morocco has failed to protect the middle class and that the lower classes are not benefiting from economic development. By the same token, the 2014 UN Human Development Report ranked Morocco 129th out of 187 countries on the Human Development Index. The relatively low morale of Moroccan families follows the same lines, according to the 2014 report by the official High Planning Commission. Households are rather pessimistic as to the country's capacity to find solutions to the problem of unemployment and regarding their own ability to save.

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In his traditional Throne Day Speech in late July, the King likewise mentioned social injustice and the resulting tension, while implicitly blaming the government. He stated: "I, like the Moroccan people, ask myself in astonishment: where is this fortune? Have all Moroccans enjoyed it or did it only affect certain sectors?"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Throne Day Speech by Mohammed VI on 30 July 2014 (: "أناشأنا مع المغاربة : أين هي هذه الثروة ؟" (وهل استأنا

Slightly over a week later, the Head of Government seemed to reply to the sovereign, stating during the Afro-American Summit in Washington DC that in Morocco, it is the King who governs and not the PJD.<sup>2</sup> Under these conditions, three trade union centres friendly with the parliamentary opposition organised a general strike on 23 September with relative success. But the government refused to accede to their demands, which were essentially of a socio-economic order and particularly included a demand for raising the lowest salaries. The government justified itself by recalling the crushing weight of debt service and the repercussions of the economic crisis that struck some of the country's most important economic partners – namely, the European Union and the United States – several years ago, eventually reaching Morocco. In any case, in order to limit the impact of the stated reforms on low revenue, the government proceeded to establish a minimum income for widows with minors in their charge as well as divorced women without pensions, but in practice, this only affects a minute part of the population. Measures were likewise established to assist workers having lost their jobs and to lower the price of medicine. On the social level, the education and health sectors continue to garner anger and criticism from civil society organisations, including those in favour of the government. Their serious dysfunction is pointed out by both the official and the independent media. The Minister of Education acknowledges the “catastrophic” state, to use his own words, of the education sector. He stated on 23 September at a press conference that the majority of Moroccan students do not know how to read or write upon completing primary school.

### **Moroccan Diplomacy over the Course of the Year**

#### *Goodbye Paris, Hello Madrid*

On the diplomatic level, while 2013 was marked by a brief but relatively acute crisis with the United States and the United Nations on the matter of Western Sahara, 2014 was the year of the crisis with France.

Over the course of 2014, nearly perfect relations with Spain emerge, the latter seeming to benefit from the estrangement with Paris. By the same token, King Mohammed VI's trip to Washington in late 2013 and his meeting with Barack Obama expressed a positive note in US-Moroccan relations that lasted throughout 2014.

The crisis with France, which began in February 2014 and did not end until early 2015, is the most serious crisis Morocco has had with the former colonial power in a quarter of a century. The cause was the summoning of Morocco's head of counter-espionage by French courts following complaints made by people living in France who claimed to have been arrested and tortured by Moroccan secret service. As soon as the summons was presented at the residence of the Moroccan ambassador to France, Rabat unilaterally suspended judiciary cooperation between the two countries and reduced its security cooperation with Paris to a minimum.

The Moroccan press with affinities to the government gave various explanations for the tension between the two capitals but rarely openly mentioned the direct cause of the crisis, indicated above. Said press held that France was retaliating against Morocco for the Kingdom's diplomatic and economic success in sub-Saharan Africa, a subregion that Paris considers its back yard.

#### *Vitality and Rashness in Africa*

In fact, King Mohammed VI is playing an active role in peacemaking efforts in Mali. In 2014, as he has for several years now, the King took a number of trips on the continent, particularly to Western and Equatorial Africa. His visits, which involved large delegations often including businesspeople, led to economic and cultural cooperation agreements, as well as religious ones at times. In line with Morocco's comeback on the continent, in late January 2014, the King received Bilal Ag Cherif, the leader of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL), one of the main political-military actors in northern Mali, who is perceived as favourable to Morocco. Some two weeks later, members of the Algerian Army fired on a Moroccan surveillance post near the

<sup>2</sup> See the statements by Abdelilah Benkirane from 8 August 2014 on the Al Hurra television website.

border between the two countries, injuring several people. Morocco considered the incident an act of retaliation by Algeria against Rabat, for the MNLA is dragging its feet in joining the reconciliation process of Malian stakeholders promoted by Algiers. This incident is thus perceived as part of the diplomatic competition of the two neighbours in the subregion. Despite its African vitality, Moroccan diplomacy seems not to have a coherent sense of continuity; it sometimes falls into rashness and gets excited about successes that are at times short-lived.

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#### Freedom in Check

The international association Reporters without Borders criticises Morocco in its February 2014 report on freedom of the press in the world. The country ranks an unenviable 136th out of 180. This regression of freedom of the press and of public freedoms

in general would be corroborated over the course of the year. The banning of the Freedom Now association in May 2014 followed by Minister of the Interior Mohamed Hassad's statements against civil society organisations, which he alleged receive funding from abroad in order to serve anti-Moroccan agendas, are moving in the direction of a backlash. The Minister likewise stated that these organisations represent an obstacle to the authorities' effective struggle against terrorism. Human rights organisations such as the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) and other civil society agents reacted strongly to the Minister's attacks, which were not limited solely to statements. Indeed, numerous meetings and activities were banned every month and many organisations such as the Moroccan Association of Investigative Journalists (AMJI) and the Moroccan Digital Rights Association (ADN) are not receiving certification for registration or renewal of their executive bodies. By the same token, assaults are sometimes made on pacific protesters or isolated activists at night, as happened to Hicham Mansouri on 24 September in Rabat.

The Minister's statement seemed to officially kick off a repressive campaign without precedents since the current administration led by the Islamist Abdelilah Benkirane came into office following the Moroccan Arab Spring protests in 2011.

In conclusion, we can say that the Moroccan economic machine continued to improve its performance in 2014 but the wealth produced remains very unequally distributed. On the political level, the PJD claims that its strategy is one of long-term reform. It prefers to make the concessions it considers necessary to gain the monarchy's trust and the normalisation of its relations with it. This timid position, which relies on the cumulative, progressive nature of the 'democratisation process' has facilitated the undeniable regression of public freedoms that are making Morocco return to the pre-2011 situation.