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Who Does the King Speak for? Executive Power, the Executors and Protests in Morocco

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On 30 July 2018, Mohammed VI chose the city of Alhucemas to pronounce his annual Feast of the Throne speech. The choice of location for the event had great political significance: the King was turning the page on the protest movement that for months had shaken the city, the force of the law was still being brought against the rebels and he appealed to patriotic unity to garner support for the development projects aimed at resolving the “social question.” Looking beyond royal speeches, Moroccan political life has continued its course, marked by the following events: 1) the controversies caused by statements made by the former President and Islamist leader of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), Abdelilah Benkirane, who the King sacked in March 2017 for refusing to lead a government coalition formed, at the request of the Palace, by his staunchest opponents; 2) the debates surrounding a series of pledged legal reforms, some of which have been pending since the ratification of the Constitution in 2011; and 3) lastly, protest movements of varying natures, such as the consumer boycott, which, having a large degree of anonymity, reduces the risk of participants being subjected to repression at the hands of security forces.

The Return to a Citizen Monarchy?

Since his accession to the Alaouite throne in 1999, Mohammed VI has presented himself as a king who governs and listens to his people. He summed up what he hoped would be the nature of his new regime under the formula of an “executive and citizen monarchy.” This placed the King above the political parties and meant that decisions on defining the major strategic lines for the country's future were his authority. The political parties called upon to form a government based on their electoral results were charged with the task of carrying out his policies. However, the country's modernization project stands in sharp contrast to its current social problems, the famous “social question,” a major topic on the country's agenda thanks to the emergence of numerous, substantially long-lasting protest movements, which have shown a strong capacity to mobilize. Despite the municipal and legislative elections held in 2015 and 2016, respectively, the monarchy generally blames the elected representatives for the social situation's deterioration. It was their mission as mediators between the population and the Palace that must have failed. Mohammed VI had no hesitation in firing several ministers in October 2017 and proposing their replacements four months later to the President of the government, Saadeddine El Othmani, the mediator, who simply went along with the decisions taken by the Palace. It was a similar story in the summer of 2018, when El Othmani, following the King's instructions, announced three important decisions taken without prior debate:

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the dismissal of the Economy Minister; the bill reinstating compulsory military service; and remaining on daylight saving time. All this has perplexed observers who believe the changes are damaging to the regime's "soft authoritarianism" and its goal to further democratize its institutions. Others, however, welcome the presence of political leadership with a clear vision; one that opts for technocratic solutions and sidesteps the vacillations of political parties.

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Fully aware of this reality, in the King's national addresses in 2018, he repeatedly made mention of the "social question," improvements to his subjects' living conditions and his concern that society be listened to. Thus he hoped to show his self-proclaimed commitment to listen to society and respond to its legitimate demands. Mohammed VI has drawn out another roadmap in which he incorporates everything from plans for far-reaching reforms to specific measures in different areas (a new administrative register for users, vocational training reforms and the widespread use of foreign languages in teaching certain subjects, a new phase of the National Human Development Initiative (INDH), the extension of healthcare coverage to the disadvantaged, the reactivation of regional business investment centres, a new water and agriculture policy and, last but not least, the reinstatement of military service). All these announcements have been applauded by the political elite, and the government has hurriedly adopted certain reforms, while leading people to understand that preparations were underway for the others. However, in most cases, it was simply a question of relaunching, renewing or updating policies and initiatives which already have precedents in recent decades. This is the case for the INDH (2005) or the "Green Morocco Plan" (2009), hailed in the recent past as success stories of the new reign.

A Government of Executors

Saadeddine El Othmani is somehow aware that he has been given what could be described as a "free ride" to his position as head of government. Hence, the opposition he has to face is threefold: the supporters of Benkirane within his own party, the PJD; his government's National Rally of Independents (RNI), whose new leader, Aziz Akhannouch, is already setting his sights on leading the country, and, lastly, from within the Parliament, the Istiqlal party and Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), who aspire to become the real opposition to the Islamists.

A year after failing to form a government, Benkirane ended his silence in thunderous fashion in February 2018. For his return to public life, he chose the PJD's youth congress, in whose ranks he enjoys great popularity. His criticisms were aimed at Akhannouch and the mixing of two different worlds: that of private business (great fortunes) and public service (senior politicians); a mix that he describes as a "danger to the State." This kind of discourse seduced the grassroots supporters of the PJD, who are yet to assimilate the Seraglio's opposition to their demands as victors of the last legislative elections. Even though Benkirane has lost the battle with the Palace, it is true to say that his popularity has been bolstered in a kind of "David and Goliath" scenario. In contrast, his successor, El Othmani, is criticized by the party's grassroots support for accepting his role as mere executor of decisions adopted by others. Within this political composition, Benkirane plays his corresponding role: that of a political "scarecrow." After all, his outbursts suit the monarchy fine, since such provocations help to suggest the existence of an active political life, fuelled by ideological differences and deliberations over inaccurate results. However, it is also true to say that this attitude hinders the work of the Prime Minister, who has to adopt the role of "firefighter," putting out the flames ignited by Benkirane's attacks each time he criticizes a government member who does not belong to the PJD.

It should be acknowledged that El Othmani's job is not at all straightforward, and is made more difficult by the independent ministers (Secretary General of the government, Ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs) and other political groups that are only accountable to the Palace. If we exclu-

sively consider matters affecting the social model or public freedoms, it is worth noting that, although the King has repeatedly given instructions in recent years for legislation to take definitive steps forward, the fact is that learning foreign languages at the different schooling stages, giving official status to the Amazigh language, the criminal code reform or the National Action Plan for Democracy and Human Rights have all continued to raise controversy and hurdles throughout the political year.

The King is quick to show the world that he listens to his people, and has demonstrated on different occasions that he can make or break political careers. However, the political elite's capacity to listen also has its limits, which return to the surface of debates when it comes to renouncing founding ideological principles. This is especially valid for certain parties, like the Islamist PJD, which revolves around the central issue of Muslim identity and, as a corollary to this, the Arabization of Moroccan society. After having assumed the leadership of the government, the PJD has to learn to conciliate the will of the executive monarchy, managing a heterogeneous ministerial coalition, a parliament with unstable and unpredictable majorities, a militant base with expectations of change and a society that is demonstrating its discontent with increasing frequency. That is why the erratic nature of many decision-making processes is not solely the result of obstructions caused by the Palace-imposed legislative and decisional filter system or the absence of consensus between political groups in the government with very different political persuasions and trajectories. It is also the result of certain political parties learning to play the parliamentary game, whose members do not always fully understand the complexities and subtleties of the written rules on how Parliament operates, or the behind-the-scenes manoeuvres that these rules and the party leadership power systems allow.

The King may often express his preferences, but he will only impose these if he sees that the balances of power or the pressure of the national or international context work in his favour. If this is not the case, there may be certain adjustments made, which allow for scaled-back versions of the reforms to be undertaken or which allow these to be shelved until such time that their implementation is more favourable. In the meantime, naturally, the negligence of the political establishment receives the blame.

Side-lining the Legitimacy of Opposition in the Public Space

On 26 June, after eight months of trials, the main figures that were arrested from the Rif protest movement were sentenced in the first instance to up to 20 years in prison for criminal acts that watered down the movement's social demands. Their confessions and testimonies were taken as sufficient evidence, despite their being obtained under pressure, as an unofficial report from the National Human Rights Council (CNDH) seems to confirm, which was leaked to the press. The grounds for handing down such tough sentences were, firstly, the human and material damage from the buildings that were set alight and the acts of violence carried out against the agents of authority; secondly, conspiracy with foreign agents, by using the support of separatist media from the Riffian diaspora in Europe; and, thirdly, the refusal to negotiate with local or government delegations on the ground.

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The protest movement, however, made mistakes which were later used to discredit it: the absence of Moroccan flags in the demonstrations was enough to satisfy those who claimed there was involvement from pro-independence supporters; the attacks on the police called into question the movement's peaceful ethos; and, lastly, the statements made by the protest leader, Nasser Zefzafi, before his arrest, have damaged the movement, as they were, on occasion, directly aimed at the King. These were compounded by Zefzafi's interruption of an imam's controversial sermon aimed at discrediting the movement.

Nevertheless, Moroccan society as a whole has been sensitive to the demands and sentences of the young Rifians, although the visibility of symbols of Rifian irredentism have led to a certain reticence. Several protest demonstrations took place to denounce the court verdicts. But, far from being a show of strength, as was the case with the march in Rabat on 6 June 2017 (the biggest mobilization since 2011), the marches in July 2018 in Casablanca and Rabat, in contrast, allowed the rifts within the forces opposing the executive monarchy to rise to the surface. The Federation of the Democratic Left (FGD) refused to allow Amazigh and, especially, Islamist militants from Justice and Spirituality to officially join the protests, aware that the latter are the only ones with real power to rally the masses together.

Meanwhile, the population awaited some kind of gesture from the King. Mohammed VI offered a Solomon-like response: 188 arrested activists received the royal pardon, but none of its main leaders were among them. Another episode worthy of mention are the events that unfolded in late December 2017 in the old mining town of Jerada, where two young men died after getting trapped in an abandoned coal pit. This tragic occurrence gave rise to a series of demonstrations that were organized to draw the government's attention to the region's situation. Neighbourhood committees were set up to dialogue with the visiting government delegations and follow-up on the government's promises to relaunch investments and stimulate employment. Finally, last spring, the authorities proceeded with the arrest of some sixty people. The court later handed down tough three-to-nine-month prison sentences to four of the demonstrators. Like in the Rif, an atmosphere of martial law has taken hold in Jerada, and the repression has been justified by accusations of manipulation, in which the population has fallen victim, depending on the case, to the Islamists of "Justice and Spirituality," the leftists of the "Democratic Way" or even the coal mafia (businessmen who benefited from clandestine exploitation known as the "coal barons").

The Boycott: An Unprecedented Success of Civil Disobedience

On 20 April, a campaign to boycott three commercial brands was launched on social media. These

were three symbols of Moroccan capitalism: Central Danone, Sidi Ali and Afriquia, which are also in collusion with the political powers. Danone represents the French influence, Sidi Ali belongs to the chairwoman of the General Confederation of Morocco Enterprises, and Afriquia is the property of Aziz Akhannouch.

The campaign's success owed firstly to the high cost of living, and, secondly, to the dominant positions of these companies in the economy and the connections between their directors and high-level technocracy, the government and the Palace. It is

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the first time that a popular mobilization launched exclusively on social media has enjoyed such levels of success (Mesbah, 2018). After the repression suffered by the protestors in the Rif and Jerada, the boycott was run as an act of civil disobedience and was seen to be less dangerous for those participating. Who was behind the campaign is, as of yet, unknown, and, in any case, is of little significance. What is relevant here, is the boycott's enormous popular success, which reveals the population's demands for improvements in their living conditions in the belief that social equalities have worsened. It also ratifies their rejection of a political elite they have not elected, which is far removed from their daily realities and looks upon the protesters with contempt. The latter can be seen in the descriptions used for the boycotters, who were branded as "stupid" by the Finance Minister, "removed from reality" by the Agriculture Minister or even "traitors of the nation" by a senior manager at "Central Danone" in Morocco.

Conclusions

Mohammed VI assures everyone he is listening to his people. But who is to know if, beyond the government, anyone is listening to the King? His goal of re-launching a broad series of projects is being undertaken without any mention of the protest movements that have affected different regions in the last two years or the boycott launched in April 2018. What all

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these protest actions have in common is the perception of rising inequalities among the different population groups and the different regions. The discrepancy between the country's success story and the population's daily reality is increasingly less tolerable for wide sectors of the population, particularly for the youth, who have participated *en masse* in the protest movements, even to the point of leading them. It is true that "letting time take its course" is still a prevalent approach of the Moroccan monarchy. The King

understands that by waiting until the seemingly irreconcilable differences between conflicting interests are visible to everyone, his role as arbitrator, above the different actors, will be given fresh strength. Nevertheless, Mohammed VI has no other choice than to adapt his discourse and strategy to the current scenario, typified by the simultaneity and immediacy of the international, regional and local circulation of information, which young Moroccans follow on social media; youth who, mostly, have known only the "executive" monarchy and its promises of social and economic modernization.

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