

Morocco: 10 Years of Mohammed VI's Reign

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Bernabé López García

Director

Mediterranean International Studies Workshop

Professor of History of Contemporary Islam

Department of Arab and Islamic Studies

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Ten years is ample time to outline a plan for government. Has Mohammed VI used his first decade on the throne to draw one up and begin to implement it? Does such a plan truly exist or is it more of a hidden agenda, so as not to openly announce a project that might touch more than a few nerves in a deeply conservative society?

This review of the major events in Morocco during the first ten years of Mohammed VI's reign aims to assess how closely one of the European Union's main Mediterranean partners, a country that was granted an advanced status on 13 October 2008, adheres to the European project.

Mohammed VI and the International Press

Unlike his father, Mohammed VI is not wont to announce his plans to the media. He has granted only a smattering of public interviews, such as those given to *Time* on 20 June 2000, on the eve of his trip to the USA, to *Le Figaro* on 4 September 2001 and to *El País* on 16 January 2005, before a visit to Morocco by the Spanish King and Queen.

In the first of these interviews, conducted hardly a year after his ascension to the throne, he discussed his priorities as a leader: the fight against poverty, misery and illiteracy; a new understanding of authority based on its service to the people and not vice versa; the fight against violence and ignorance in a tolerant Morocco; and moral recognition of the vic-

tims of the "years of lead." All of this was to be achieved by engaging people and ensuring their participation, in particular, that of young people.

In the interview granted to the conservative French daily, following his second year on the throne, he spoke clearly of "reform," but noted that it would have to balance "tradition and modernisation," which, in his view, "[could] easily go hand and hand." The Moroccan king defined himself as "neither absolutist nor parliamentary," but rather "strong, democratic and executive," far removed from the Spanish model. Moroccan development would be achieved through "true engagement by Europe," which was embodied above all by France, Morocco's "champion within the European Union."

Finally, in the interview published by the Spanish newspaper, following half a decade on the throne, the Moroccan king cited several reforms that had already been tackled, including those related to the family code, gender equality, the recognition of Berber culture, the reorganisation of the religious field and the Equity and Reconciliation Commission set up to help Morocco come to terms with its past. As for his conception of the monarchy, he reiterated that one should not seek to "transpose the model of European monarchies." He insisted on the vital role for development to be played by infrastructure projects, such as the Tanger-Med port, motorways, tourism infrastructure, duty-free zones, etc.; called Spain a "good advocate for our cause in Europe," notwithstanding the recent crisis between the two countries; and defined Morocco as a country firmly committed to the Barcelona Process, despite its free trade agreement with the United States. He likewise emphasised that Morocco is a Maghreb country and not part of the Greater Middle East that the previous American administration had tried to design.

Throne Day Speeches and Political Projects

Mohammed VI has used his Throne Day speeches, on the yearly anniversary of his ascension to the throne, to lay out his plans in much more detail than in his newspaper interviews. In his first speech, on 30 July 1999, he outlined the general framework in which his kingdom should evolve. To wit, it should “move forward on the path of development and modernity and enter the third millennium with a forward-looking view, in perfect harmony and mutual understanding with [its] partners, preserving its identity and uniqueness, without isolating itself, in the framework of a reaffirmed *authenticity* and a *modernity* that does not shy away from our sacred values.” The political model to be followed was that of a “constitutional monarchy, a multiparty system, economic liberalism, the establishment of the rule of law, the safeguard of both human rights and individual and collective freedoms and a guarantee of security and stability for all.” One decade later, how has this vision fared?

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The quest to reconcile tradition and modernity has steered Mohammed VI's policy more towards continuity than a clean break with the past. In *Marruecos y Hassan II. Un testimonio* (Morocco and Hassan II: A Testimony), the historian Abdallah Laroui argues that, from the very start of Mohammed VI's reign, the old system has wielded such influence that “loyalty to tradition has verged on superstition.” Laroui goes so far as to call it a lost opportunity to usher in an era of constitutional monarchy, an innovation that, in his opinion, would have been accepted by a majority of Moroccans. The decade since has therefore swung between these extremes. It is telling that when, in 2009, a public figure and close confidant of Mohammed VI (Fouad Ali El Himma, a classmate of the king's at the Royal College who, as Deputy Interior Minister for Security Affairs, was considered for much of the decade to be the regime's strongman) founded a new political

party, he called it “Authenticity and Modernity” (PAM from the French), the very two antipodes emphasised by the king in his first royal address. Needless to say, these concepts point in two different directions, which, no matter how fervently one wishes to make them compatible, often cancel each other out, preventing progress towards development.

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One crucial component of this continuity has been the continuance of men from the former regime at the head of key institutions, such as the army and security apparatus. Although, in the first months of his reign, buoyed by the euphoria surrounding what was seen as a process of change, the king sacked Hassan II's long-time favourite, the Interior Minister Driss Basri, other prominent figures from the former authoritarian regime, such as the generals Hosni Benslimane and Hamidou Laanigri, among others, denounced by human rights organisations for their active participation in the “years of lead,” retained their posts. Such facts damaged Morocco's image abroad and took some of the shine off memorable events, such as the return of emblematic exiles like Abraham Serfaty and, above all, the creation and work of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which bravely investigated disappearances and other State crimes and compensated the victims of the repression.

Reform, Islamism and the “Inching Transition”

The key to what is seen from the outside as an “inching transition” lies in the co-existence of two contradictory projects advocating an actual transition and what might be called a “counter-transition.” Both projects follow parallel paths, but in opposite directions, thereby often counteracting each other. As a result of the atomisation that has characterised the political panorama since the days of Hassan II (which began under Mohammed V, who sought to

weaken political forces in order to strengthen the throne), the only way to form a parliamentary majority is to build a coalition from five, six or even seven parties with distinct political leanings, making it impossible to lay down a clear line of governmental behaviour. Although the “alternance” government, led by the socialist Abderrahmane Youssefi, did embark, in the final years of Hassan II’s reign, on a reform agenda to which it managed to adhere following Mohammed VI’s ascension to the throne, its requisite alliance with conservative parties such as the Independence Party (Istiqlal) or the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and ultra-conservative parties such as Mahjoubi Aherdane’s National Popular Movement (MNP) caused flagship projects, such as the integration of women in the development process, to founder. This deadlock, which resulted from the grassroots pressure of demonstrations called by Islamist groups that were attended by hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens, ultimately placed the modernising drive for a new family code, or *Moudawana*, in the hands of the king. The new law, passed on 3 February 2004, significantly enhanced women’s legal status in Morocco and has come to be seen as the decade’s most important accomplishment, despite the obstacles to its implementation thrown up by an extremely conservative segment of public opinion and an archaic justice system.

This trend against a decidedly democratic transition is backed by the old conservative parties, which have always been closely allied with the government, and the political Islam movement. In the only known work by Mohammed VI, his doctoral thesis, published in 1994 and written prior to the legalisation of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), the then crown prince discussed whether Islamist groups should be legalised thusly: “Although their legalisation would make it possible to control them and to channel their energy towards lawful political action, would it not also risk allowing the Islamists to do away with democracy?” In the decade he has governed, Mohammed VI has got on well with this legal branch of Islamism, which accepts the framework of the Moroccan monarchy and has burst onto the national scene, winning similar numbers of votes as the main parties of yesteryear, Istiqlal and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP). He even prevented their illegalisation after the attacks of May 2003. Of course, the 2002 and 2007 elections clearly showed that the PJD, whilst quite strong in the cities, has an

electoral ceiling that prevents it from obtaining a parliamentary majority. Nevertheless, this urban strength might well have allowed it to take control of many of the country’s main capital cities, above all, the economic capital, Casablanca, in the municipal elections, had the government not moved to block it in collusion with the PAM.

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In contrast, relations have not been so smooth with Abdessalam Yassin’s group, which opposes the monarch’s religious leadership. The party remains illegal, although tolerated, and multiple efforts have been made to repress it.

Normalisation and Banalisation of Elections

One feature of these ten years of government under Mohammed VI has been the normalisation of the electoral process, with elections being held regularly: legislative elections were held in 2002 and 2007 and local elections in 2003 and 2009. Whereas in his father’s era, elections were held irregularly, frequently delayed on a variety of pretexts and, above all, blatantly manipulated by the Interior Ministry, the elections held over the last ten years have stood out for their transparency. This notwithstanding, there is no denying their irrelevance for a population unmotivated by their scant impact on day-to-day life in the country.

It could be argued that one of Mohammed VI’s top priorities over the last ten years has been to rehabilitate politics. Unfortunately, he has not accomplished this goal. Participation in elections has steadily declined from 58% in the last legislative elections held under Hassan II (1997) to 52% in the first elections held under the new king (2002) to 37% in the 2007 elections. This occurred despite the enormous get-out-the-vote drives made by

civil society organisations, such as the 2007 Daba campaign. Worse still, these figures hide the fact that one in four people of voting age did not even register to vote and, therefore, also did not participate. This disenchantment and lack of confidence in institutions runs particularly deep among the younger generations. Although the local elections did not see the same degree of abstention, they, too, failed to stir much interest, despite the dramatic rise of the new Authenticity and Modernity Party, which put in a better showing than the country's historical parties.

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This widespread lack of interest is often blamed on the political parties, which do indeed suffer from clear stagnation: they are consistently dominated by the same élite few and content to play second fiddle to the country's preeminent institution, the monarchy. The latter, in turn, tried to breathe new life into the political scene by regulating, through a law on political parties, how parties work, although without modifying their secondary role in the system. The first elections during the reign of Mohammed VI saw the emergence of new political formations, with a total of 26 parties in the running, as compared to 15 parties five years earlier. In Morocco's long tradition of political atomisation, some of the new parties had split off from older ones. The law, which was passed in December 2005, aimed to encourage the concentration of this broad spectrum of parties into core political groups built around the most established formations. However, only a few of the smaller formations answered the call (with the exception, among the historical parties, of the Popular Movement, whose splinter groups reunited in a single party), such that, by 2007, the election was contested by 32 parties, giving rise to a parliament

made up of 20 different political forces, of which only five controlled between 10% and 16% of the seats, three between 4% and 8%, and a cohort of 12 others less than 3%.

This failure of the law on political parties may have sparked the reinvention of a dominant party, embodying the values of the monarchy. However, in the opinion of Moroccan political analysts, such as Mohamed Tozy, the PAM "carries in its very name the seeds of an ambivalence that situate it outside the modernisation project."

Overall Assessment

In 2006, Morocco celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its independence. Based on an initiative first unveiled in a royal speech given on 20 August 2003, the occasion was used to conduct an assessment of the country's successes, challenges and goals. More than a hundred senior officials and leading intellectuals were recruited for the effort. The result was a wide-ranging report focused on human development ("50 Years of Human Development and Prospects for 2025") that was at times self-critical and that faithfully reflected reality without engaging in propaganda. The report underscored accomplishments such as the reduction of public external debt and inflation, leading to a certain comfort abroad, as well as domestic achievements such as the improvement in rural life through a dramatic increase in access to electricity and drinking water or overall advances in access to education, one of the country's major points of unfinished business. Attention was likewise drawn to hardships that have kept five million Moroccans below the poverty line and led more than 10% of the population to live outside the country in a diaspora primarily found in the EU. This assessment gave rise to a National Initiative for Human Development, devoted to fighting poverty and marginalisation. Despite support from several funds and charitable foundations linked to the monarchy, this well-intentioned initiative has not managed to budge the country from its UNDP 2009 Human Development Index ranking of 130.

Notwithstanding the above, according to a poll published in *Le Monde* on 4 August 2009, the Moroccan people seem to have favourable views of Mohammed VI's first decade on the throne. A whopping 91% of those polled approved of his reign, with 40%

considering the decade to have been quite positive and 51% somewhat positive. Additionally, 49% of respondents considered the Moroccan monarchy democratic, and 69% believed that the king's prominent role in economic affairs was good for Morocco's development. In contrast, opinions about poverty were contradictory, with 37% believing that the country had improved and an equal number believing it had stagnated. Finally, a majority of those surveyed believed that the *Moudawana* reform had given "too many" rights to women, compared to 30% who viewed it positively and 16% who deemed it insufficient. The poll was not published in Morocco, where the government prohibited the sale of both the French newspaper and the weekly *Tel Quel*, which had published it jointly.

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At the end of the decade, and despite improvements in many areas, certain issues continue to tarnish Morocco's image abroad, including, in particular, the issue of freedoms and human rights and the prolongation of the conflict in the Western Sahara. While liberalisation of the press has improved the media panorama in the country, the independent press has encountered difficulties and even sanctions as a result of governmental arbitrariness and a justice system at its command. Indeed, the lack of reform of the justice system has been singled out by the European Commission's ambassador in Rabat, Bruno de Thomas (interview

in *Le Matin*, 27 July 2009) as a major obstacle to development, as it hinders the fight against corruption and undermines the confidence of foreign investors.

Finally, new solutions were proposed for the problem of the Sahara in the autonomy initiative presented by Morocco at the United Nations in April 2007. Unfortunately, the initiative appears to be incompatible with Morocco's current territorial and constitutional framework. The Advisory Committee on Regionalisation, set up in January 2010 under the leadership of then-ambassador to Spain Omar Azziman, has been tasked with proposing changes to this framework in the form of a new design for a plural and decentralised Morocco that could facilitate negotiations, which remained at a standstill throughout the decade despite the UN's attempts at mediation and successive rounds of talks between Morocco and the Polisario. Such a design can only succeed, however, if it culminates in an offer of true rule of law.

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