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Authoritarian Stability through Perpetual Democratisation

by Francesco Cavatorta



ABSTRACT

The survival of the Moroccan monarchy during the Arab revolts did not come as a surprise. Once the King reclaimed political leadership through the launch of a constitutional reform, the protest movement faded and whatever challenge to the pre-eminence of the monarchy in the political system might have existed ended quickly. A number of different and interlinked explanations have been advanced for the survival of authoritarianism in Morocco, but they generally rehash conventional wisdoms about Moroccan politics that may not be as valid as they were in the past. This paper looks beyond such traditional explanations, focusing on less obvious factors that contributed to the survival of the monarchy. A more sophisticated explanation for the survival of the regime can serve as a more insightful guide to what Morocco might look like in the future and what are the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Morocco | Authoritarianism | Democracy | Arab Spring

keywords

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Introduction

The Arab Spring began in Morocco soon after the departure of Ben Ali from Tunisia and the downfall of Mubarak in Egypt when, on 20 February 2011, the streets of the major Moroccan cities filled with demonstrators demanding better governance, an end to corruption and a fairer redistribution of resources. The crowds taking to the streets were the largest ever seen since independence and seemed to suggest that the monarchy was in trouble. After all, the socio-economic and political problems at the roots of the uprisings elsewhere in the region affected Morocco as well, namely poor governance, the high incidence of both low- and high-end corruption, substantial unemployment and underemployment, increasing economic inequality and an unresponsive political system. According to Colombo, “the growing problems of poor education and high unemployment” in particular were endangering the sustainability of the state and its institutions.¹ However, contrary to the demands of demonstrators in Tunisia and Egypt, the protesting crowds never demanded the end of monarchical rule. This allowed Mohammed VI to seize quickly the political initiative, turning the demonstrations into an opportunity to restructure his rule and pre-empt further challenges, at least in the short term, to the stability of the regime. Specifically, the King announced that a new constitution would be drawn up and that the process of transition to democracy would continue, with the launch of reforms that would meet the protestors’ demands. The direct intervention of the monarch as the supreme arbiter of the political system weakened the protest movement and by the summer of 2011 the Moroccan Spring was effectively over, to the relief of the ruling elites and the international community. Explanations for the relative ease with which the survival of the monarchy was ensured rested on

¹ Silvia Colombo, “Morocco at the Crossroads: Seizing the Window of Opportunity for Sustainable Development”, in Silvia Colombo and Nathalie Tocci (eds.), *The Challenges of State Sustainability in the Mediterranean*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, 2011, p. 161, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/1376>.

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the factors that are traditionally employed to account for events and developments in Moroccan politics: the religious and historical legitimacy of the monarchy; the tried and tested strategies of “divide and rule”; and the co-optation of crucial political actors in a context of widespread depoliticisation. Accepting these factors as the components of a valid explanation for the success of the Moroccan monarchy would suggest implicitly that the monarch has secured the stability and sustainability of the state for the long term, because such variables are so recurrent as to become immutable. The present analysis departs from these conventional wisdoms. While the three factors mentioned above should not be disregarded, it should be highlighted that other factors played a significant role in the survival of the monarchy and they include repressive practices, ideological disputes within the opposition, neo-liberal economics and “depoliticisation through technocratisation.” When these other factors are placed centre stage, an examination of their impact might lead one to think of the future of Morocco in a different manner, providing for other scenarios than the perpetual dominance of the monarchy and its design of perpetual democratisation.

1. The Moroccan Spring

Since coming to power in 1999, Mohammed VI has in many ways transformed Moroccan politics and society.² From an institutional point of view, the King has expanded the competencies of elected representatives, permitting much more genuine party competition and holding regular, reasonably free and fair elections. Crucially, he brought the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) into the fold of institutional politics, putting in practice the moderation through inclusion thesis. Together with the relaxation of measures that had permitted tight control over society – such as increased freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the liberation of political prisoners – this liberalising programme provided the impetus for the Moroccan process of democratisation that Hassan II had tentatively begun. Mohammed VI also set about boosting economic growth and during the course of his reign significant economic reforms have been launched, allowing the country to benefit from reasonably strong growth. A number of innovative reforms have been introduced in the agricultural, energy and tourism sectors, while the state also “launched a series of highly publicized investment projects in infrastructure and transport.”³ In addition, ties with both the United States and the European Union have deepened over time, increasing foreign direct investment in the country. As part of the strategy of globalising the Moroccan economy, the King did not neglect to promote economic partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa, encouraging large Moroccan firms to take advantage of the opening of markets there.⁴ From a social point of view, the King’s main and globally lauded achievement has been the reform

² Pierre Vermeren, *Le Maroc de Mohammed VI. La transition inachevée*, Paris, La Découverte, 2009.

³ Silvia Colombo, “Morocco at the Crossroads...”, cit., p. 165.

⁴ David Baché, “Les investissements marocains en Afrique subsaharienne”, in *Radio France International*, 29 May 2015, (audio) <http://rfi.my/1HyQTJj>.

of the family code in 2004, which granted women a substantial degree of legal equality on a range of matters.⁵ Finally, despite some terrorist attacks taking place over the years, Morocco has generally experienced much less political violence than many of its Arab neighbours. Thus, the projection of Morocco as a modernising, liberalising and democratising country with an enlightened monarch at the helm is largely accepted in policymaking circles and the media.

Such an image, however, was, and still is, partly erroneous and it has tended to obscure the more unsavoury traits of the regime as well as overplaying its economic successes. While the genuine socio-economic and political achievements the Kingdom has obtained over the last two decades should not be brushed aside as irrelevant, significant problems remain and were key factors in spurring the 2011 demonstrations. It is on these that many analysts have focused their attention throughout the 2010s. In the field of economic policymaking, the overall conclusion after over a decade of reforms is that "beneath the surface, Morocco's economic situation does not justify [... the] enthusiasm."⁶ Thus, at the time of the 2011 demonstrations, unemployment remained high, and under-employment was on the rise as were local protests against poor working conditions and lack of opportunities,⁷ although all of this was under-reported. Since then, criticism has been laid at the door of the reform of the agricultural sector,⁸ the changes in the energy sector,⁹ and the new plan to attract tourism to the country.¹⁰ For a variety of reasons, ranging from poor planning to even poorer implementation, these reforms were not expected to be particularly helpful in boosting long-term growth and sustainability. In addition, scholars¹¹ have expressed strong doubts about the actual contribution that the urban mega-projects and the large infrastructural investments made by the Kingdom, such as the new port of Tangiers (Tangier Med), will make to economic development. In the field of institutional politics, the changes were also deemed superficial and cosmetic insofar as genuine opposition to the policymaking power of the monarch was not permitted, with parties enjoying very

⁵ Francesco Cavatorta and Emanuela Dalmaso, "Liberal Outcomes through Undemocratic Means: The Reform of the Code de Statut Personnel in Morocco", in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (December 2009), p. 487-506.

⁶ Silvia Colombo, "Morocco at the Crossroads...", cit., p. 167.

⁷ Koenraad Bogaert, "The Revolt of Small Towns: The Meaning of Morocco's History and the Geography of Social Protests", in *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 42, No. 143 (2015), p. 124-140.

⁸ Nicolas Faysse, "The Rationale of the Green Morocco Plan: Missing Links between Goals and Implementation", in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (September 2015), p. 622-634.

⁹ Gawdat Bahgat, "Morocco Energy Outlook: Opportunities and Challenges", in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (March 2013), p. 291-304.

¹⁰ Mohamed Bouzahzah and Younesse El Menyari, "International Tourism and Economic Growth: The Case of Morocco and Tunisia", in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (September 2013), p. 592-607.

¹¹ Silvia Colombo, "Morocco at the Crossroads...", cit.; Koenraad Bogaert, "Paradigms Lost in Morocco: How Urban Mega-Projects Should Disturb our Understanding of Arab Politics", in *Jadaliyya*, 4 June 2015, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21784>.

low levels of credibility and legitimacy because of their submission to monarchical diktats.¹² In fact, the authoritarian nature of the country was seen as a significant turn-off for young people, sapping their enthusiasm for joining political parties and becoming active in institutional politics.¹³ Even the most progressive reform the country experienced – the promulgation of the new family code in 2004 – was achieved through undemocratic means in the sense that the will of the monarch prevailed over both popular sentiment and the support of elected representatives for the status quo, suggesting that the unelected and unaccountable monarchy ultimately decides what goes and what does not go in the country.¹⁴

Once this alternative narrative about Morocco is taken into account, the massive anti-government demonstrations that began in February 2011 should no longer constitute a surprise. In their analyses of the roots of the Arab Spring, Chomiak and Entelis¹⁵ as well as Achcar¹⁶ have highlighted youth unemployment, poor prospects of future gainful employment, severe underemployment, worsening working conditions, price hikes and absence of genuine wealth redistribution as the common problems all countries in the region faced irrespective of the system of government. Thus, while the Arab revolts *per se* might have constituted a surprise for scholars and policymakers in terms of their timing, the fact that the upheaval hit Morocco as well was not particularly surprising. While the monarchy and the ruling elites were initially taken aback by the size and intensity of the demonstrations and were somewhat divided on how to respond,¹⁷ quite quickly the King took control of the situation, claiming to have understood the frustration of the demonstrators and promising to continue on the path of democratisation. He responded to demands for change by setting up a commission charged with drafting a new constitutional text. In July 2011, the new constitution was approved by referendum and “after the ratification [...] the state regained the upper hand.”¹⁸ With the approval of the new constitution together with the November 2011 legislative elections, which saw the victory of the Islamist party and the appointment of its leader to the position of prime minister of a coalition government, the Moroccan Spring was effectively over. While new provisions in the constitution were highlighted as profoundly democratic, analysts dismissed the new text and the actual impact it would have on the way in which power is exercised in the country. Benchemsi argued that

¹² Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb. Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*, London, Hurst, 2012.

¹³ Thierry Desrues and Said Kirlhani, “Activism under Authoritarianism: Young Political Militants in Meknes”, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 5 (December 2013), p. 753-767.

¹⁴ Francesco Cavatorta and Emanuela Dalmaso, “Liberal Outcomes Through Undemocratic Means...”, cit.

¹⁵ Laryssa Chomiak and John P. Entelis, “The Making of North Africa’s Intifadas”, in *Middle East Report*, No. 259 (Summer 2011), p. 8-15.

¹⁶ Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013.

¹⁷ Mounah Abdel-Samad, “Why Reform Not Revolution: A Political Opportunity Analysis of Morocco 2011 Protests Movement”, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (December 2014), p. 792-809.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 805.

the King had been able to “outfox” the opposition,¹⁹ while Dalmaso stated that the monarchy had been able to ride the tsunami-like waves that the revolutions had initiated.²⁰ In an analysis for the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Madani et al. underline a number of very problematic aspects of the new text and observe critically that “if the monarchy and political parties are serious about democracy, they should be serious about crafting a real democratic constitution,”²¹ explicitly pointing out that the current one is not it. Theophilopoulou sums up the scholarly consensus when she writes that the new constitution “has not resulted in a constitutional monarchy, real separation of powers, accountability by those in charge, the King abandoning his sacredness, the prime minister enjoying new constitutional powers and an end to Morocco’s clientelist system of government.”²²

If the criticism of the new text as well as of the whole political process that led to it finds such a consensus, it is imperative to explain how the monarchy – the driver of the process – has been able to effectively “upgrade its authoritarianism”²³ without generating much opposition. It is at this stage we find that the dominant accounts tend to reproduce conventional wisdoms about Moroccan politics and society that might not have the same explanatory power they had in the past, therefore leading policymakers and observers to neglect other factors that have grown in importance and that might in fact lead them to think about different scenarios for the future of the country.

2. Why authoritarianism persists

There are three interrelated explanations that are routinely employed to account for the ability of the Moroccan monarchy to survive crises. First is the historical and religious legitimacy of the King to rule. Analyses of monarchical survival in the region seem to suggest that this type of religious legitimacy is indeed a powerful tool to insulate monarchs from criticism and revolutions.²⁴ The ability of the Moroccan monarchy to reassert its dominance of the political system during the difficult

¹⁹ Ahmed Benchemsi, “Morocco: Outfoxing the Opposition”, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2012), p. 57-69, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/node/125>.

²⁰ Emanuela Dalmaso, “Surfing the Democratic Tsunami in Morocco: Apolitical Society and the Reconfiguration of a Sustainable Authoritarian Regime”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (July 2012), p. 217-232.

²¹ Mohamed Madani, Driss Maghraoui and Saloua Zerhouni, *The 2011 Moroccan Constitution: A Critical Analysis*, Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2012, p. 50, http://www.idea.int/publications/the_2011_moroccan_constitution.

²² Anna Theophilopoulou, “Morocco’s New Constitution and the Western Sahara Conflict – A Missed Opportunity?”, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.17, No. 4 (September 2012), p. 694.

²³ Steven Heydemann, “Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World”, in *Brookings Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Papers*, No. 13 (October 2007), <http://brook.gs/1ksAMZA>.

²⁴ André Bank, Thomas Richter and Anna Sunik, “Long-Term Monarchical Survival in the Middle East: A Configurational Comparison, 1945-2012”, in *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2013), p. 179-200.

days of 2011 is therefore explained in terms of such legitimacy,²⁵ which prevents social and political actors from demanding radical and genuine change because this would go against the will of the majority of citizens and their understanding of the very identity of the country. Evidence of this legitimacy has been found for instance in the absence of anti-monarchical slogans during the demonstrations, when the anger was focused on the government. Thus, obedience to the monarch through the *bay'a* is understood to be a fundamental pillar of the stability of the state, if not the most significant one. However, reaching for religious legitimacy as the dominant explanatory variable seems to be more of a reflex from the past than it is based on the reality of Morocco over the past two decades. A number of factors indeed suggest that such legitimacy might not play the role it once did. To begin with, the religious legitimacy of the monarchy to rule has been contested in some circles since the 1970s, and while the idea remained quite marginal for some time, it resurfaced powerfully during the 1990s and 2000s, when all sorts of groups "deviated" quite considerably from the type of religious legitimacy the monarchy projected and on which it rested.²⁶ From increasing criticism by the Islamist Justice and Charity group to the rise of armed Salafism, and from calls for the introduction of republicanism to the far-left critiques of absolute rule, the monarchy has been under attack. Both religious groups that do not share the same philosophy about the divine rights of the King and secular groups dismissive of the whole idea of monarchy, never mind a religion-based one, have challenged monarchs in their role as Commander of the Faithful. The evidence of the decreasing potency of the religious legitimacy of the King to rule can be found in the far-reaching reforms that Mohammed VI initiated in the religious field. This multi-pronged reform initiative attempted precisely to restore and reinforce the top-down message that the monarch was divinely permitted to govern.²⁷ While such reforms have been couched in the language of the promotion of a tolerant Moroccan Islam as opposed to the "intolerant" one coming from the Gulf, the rationale behind them is the strengthening of monarchical religious legitimacy. As mentioned, the weakening of religious legitimacy can be seen in part in the political opposition of the Justice and Charity group to the way in which Morocco is governed. In fact monarchical rule is contested because of a diverging interpretation that the group has with respect to the justifications for such rule in Islam. While the death of Sheikh Yassine might have somewhat weakened the group, it is still the largest political and social organisation in the country despite its uncertain legal status. This suggests that there are hundreds of thousands of ordinary Moroccans who do not buy into the religious legitimacy argument that is put forth, as divisions within the very broad field of political Islam demonstrate.²⁸ Finally, also from

²⁵ Hassan A. Barari, "The Persistence of Autocracy: Jordan, Morocco and the Gulf", in *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), p. 99-111.

²⁶ Francesco Cavatorta, "Neither Participation nor Revolution: The Strategy of the Moroccan Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (November 2007), p. 381-397.

²⁷ Mohammed El-Katiri, "The Institutionalisation of Religious Affairs: Religious Reform in Morocco", in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 2013), p. 53-69.

²⁸ Juan A. Macías-Amoretti, "Seeking an 'Other' Desperately: The Dialectical Opposition of Political Islam in Morocco", in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (June 2015), p. 336-348.

a religion-based critical perspective, Morocco has not been immune to political violence generated in extremist Islamist circles where the notion of the monarch as a descendant of the Prophet is not accepted. This has resulted in both domestic attacks and the departure of young Moroccans over time for foreign wars – notably those in Iraq and Syria – or terrorist operations – the attacks in Madrid in 2004. This is not to suggest that the King’s legitimacy to rule is weak because of a few thousand Moroccan fighters abroad or a few hundred violent Salafists at home. However, this is a further indication that the religious sphere in the country is much more divided over the question of the role of the monarch as Commander of the Faithful than it might at first appear. It should also be highlighted that the religious legitimisation of the King to be an executive monarch rather than a Spain-style constitutional one is criticised in leftist and secular circles as well, although not from a religious or doctrinal perspective.

Another common explanation for the ability of the monarchy to fend off challenges rests on its “divide and rule” strategies. In short, the monarchy places itself above political parties and social actors, rewarding and/or punishing them – through institutional, policy and material inducements – according to its own requirements and objectives. When a social or political actor is perceived to be too powerful or on its way to becoming so, the monarchy creates *ex novo*, or props up, a challenger to limit the scope of action of the threatening actor. Thus, rather than banning movements or parties outright with the risk of generating dangerous blowbacks, the monarchy “cages” challengers until they are tamed and prevents the formation of broad coalitions to oppose it through selective inducements, making it clear to all participants that what the crown hath given, the crown hath take away. Thus, the divisions that undermined the 20 February movement and its cohesion in the face of the King’s attempt to regain the political initiative is seen as part of the tried and tested *divide et impera* strategy. The potency of such strategies should not be underestimated because the monarchy has considerable resources it can employ to play this game of selective inducements and punishments, but such strategies have been a staple of many authoritarian regimes, including Arab monarchies, which have nevertheless fallen or been saved by international intervention, as the recent case of Bahrain highlights. In addition, such strategies might work in the context of reasonably normalised and routinised politics, when the expectations of how actors might behave are embedded in a rather rigid understanding of what might or might not be possible for them to accomplish. At quasi-revolutionary times, as Morocco seemed to be in during February and March 2011, these routinised practices might no longer function, leaving actors open to all sorts of potential choices they had not deemed possible or feasible just a few days earlier, including refusing to accept inducements in order to win a bigger prize – the political and institutional marginalisation of the monarchy – that they had not thought about in calmer times.

The final explanation for the ability of the Moroccan executive monarchy to withstand pressures to reform into a constitutional one is “depoliticisation.”²⁹ This suggests that the vast majority of Moroccan citizens are neither mobilised nor easily “mobilisable” because of the authoritarian nature of a system they have little hope of changing or even affecting. In this sense, the monarchy benefits from the detachment of ordinary people, allowing it to continue tweaking a system that remains authoritarian at its core while projecting an image of democratisation. In this sense, the protests of 2011 were not the game changer necessary to challenge the monarchy because the shared assumption among protestors was that the monarchy would not only survive, but would be central in meeting at least some of the demands of the protestors. Once that occurred, the whole opposition project would peter out. The supposed knowledge of how events will inevitably turn out therefore prevents greater engagement. Again, there is a degree of validity to this explanation insofar as ordinary Moroccans are quite disengaged from institutional politics (turnout rates at elections are quite low and for the last two rounds – legislative in 2011 and municipal in 2015 – they have hovered at just above 50 percent) and tend to focus their activism on local matters. However, it would be a mistake to think that depoliticisation is as powerful as it might appear, precisely because the detachment from institutional politics has favoured the rise of all sorts of extra-institutional localised activism over the years. In fact, as it turns out, the myth of depoliticisation quickly disappeared in the early days of the Arab Spring across different countries, when a considerable part of the citizenry supposedly disengaged from any sort of political involvement took to the streets. The problem therefore might be with the conceptualisation of depoliticisation itself. Although it might have been true that people were depoliticised in the sense of being unwilling and uninterested in participating in institutional politics through traditional actors such as political parties or long-standing civil society organisations, this did not mean they were not involved in other “politicised” activities outside of mainstream institutions. Thus, while not necessarily political in the sense of coherently attempting to change macro-political processes, local extra-institutional struggles over all sorts of issues, ranging from employment to better access to services and from minority rights to municipal matters, are intensely political in terms of challenging power structures – be they economic or social – that render the life of ordinary citizens difficult. It should also be highlighted that the fundamental trait of the 20 February movement, irrespective of its ultimate failure, is how it “sought to deconstruct the self-portrayal of the [...] regime,”³⁰ suggesting quite explicitly that the notion of a benevolent monarch ruling over a people who believe that he knows best is profoundly misplaced.

²⁹ Abdeslam Maghraoui, “Depoliticization in Morocco”, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (October 2002), p. 24-32.

³⁰ Anja Hoffmann and Christoph König, “Scratching the Democratic Façade: Framing Strategies of the 20 February Movement”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (November 2013), p. 1.

If the explanations outlined above are only partially valid, how does one explain the persistence of autocracy through the perpetuation of the mythology of the country's democratisation? There are several factors that have been understudied and underemployed when it comes to looking at Morocco and monarchical survival. First there are the repressive practices of the regime, which are very rarely examined systematically. It is true that the level of repression and blunt use of force to suppress opposing voices is no longer as significant as it was in the past or as harsh as in many other Arab countries. However, repressive practices have not ceased with the arrival of Mohammed VI to power. Over the course of his reign, publications critical of the political system have been forced to shut down, journalists have been imprisoned, public intellectuals harassed, and headquarters of human rights organisations raided by the security services. Administrative or bureaucratic procedures are often employed arbitrarily to limit dissent and while the level of physical violence has remained low, the threat of it is never too distant for those who are targeted. For instance, significant human rights abuses, including severe torture, have been committed against Salafi prisoners in the aftermath of widespread arrests following the May 2003 Casablanca bombings. This is not to suggest that Morocco is a police state; it is not the case. As Boukhars convincingly argues, "few would disagree that the gradual increase in individual liberties and the slow but steady process of economic and social liberalization have made Morocco more open and less repressive."³¹ However, as Bellin makes clear in her work on security apparatuses in the Arab world, the use or the threat of the use of force to crack down on opposition groups and individuals is a powerful instrument that allows ruling elites to survive or at least "fight back" even when their legitimacy is low or absent.³² At the height of the protests in 2011, police presence was both forceful and intimidating, with incidents of violent repression and confrontation. At some stage during the demonstrations, "gangs" of civilians supporting the regime turned against the peaceful demonstrators and while the level of violence never reached Tunisian or Egyptian proportions – never mind Yemeni or Syrian ones – the efficiency and ruthlessness of the security apparatus should not be underestimated.³³ The King also rules because of the fear of the arbitrariness of power.

The second aspect to consider is what can be termed "depoliticisation through technocracy," which is different from depoliticisation as discussed earlier. Rather than defining depoliticisation as the simple product of authoritarianism, which turns people off participating and encourages what can be called non-institutional

³¹ Anouar Boukhars, "Political violence in North Africa. The Perils of Incomplete Liberalization", in *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, No. 3 (January 2011), p. 24, <http://brook.gs/1ksGLh6>.

³² Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring", in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 2012), p. 127-149; Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (January 2004), p. 139-157.

³³ See report and footage of police brutality during a May 2011 protest in Casablanca: "Une manifestation à Casablanca réprimée avec une extrême brutalité", in *Les Observateurs*, 30 May 2011, <http://f24.my/IIIaAa>.

engagement, the concept can be defined as the outcome of a process whereby decision-making appears to be removed from both the elected institutions and, in a sense, from the real centre of power as well – in this case the monarchy. Scholars like Seeberg have suggested that in the Arab world, like in other parts of the globe, significant decision-making powers on matters of utmost importance to citizens, such as economic policymaking, have been “technocratised”, that is, seemingly placed in the hands of technocrats whose expertise in the matter is beyond both doubt and control.³⁴ Through this device of technocratisation, issues that are deemed too complex for ordinary people to understand are removed from political and partisan debates because there is a seemingly “correct” way to proceed, which expert technocrats will identify. In this respect, the public is removed from participation and effectively depoliticised because governing – even on the part of the King – is equated with technocratic management rather than political choices. In this sense even local struggles where the degree of politicisation is high tend to “hit a wall” because of the way in which their demands are rendered so complex as to become impossible to meet, otherwise the whole technocratic structure would collapse, with negative repercussions for the whole country. At least this is the way in which challenges are presented. The mythology around technocratisation is that while actors, including the monarch, would like to intervene and effect change, this is presented as impossible because of the way in which governance seemingly functions; namely, resting on purely technocratic choices that are deemed natural. This is even more obvious in the Moroccan case when one examines how government coalitions work and perform. Not only are they subservient to the monarch, but they are also ideology-less, which might be an advantage in the short run, but is detrimental to political participation because coalitions are made and remade not according to ideological preferences and proximity.³⁵ In fact they are set up according to a managerial logic where technical expertise is reified. Depoliticisation through technocracy is an important aspect of how governance is practised not only in authoritarian systems, but in democratic ones as well, generating a type of dissent that shuns engagement with political institutions. The creation of a royal commission for constitutional reform, set up by the King in the aftermath of the February 2011 demonstrations, rather than the setting up of a genuine constituent assembly with elected representatives is paradigmatic of this type of approach.

The third factor impacting on the persistence of authoritarianism in Morocco has to do with the divisions that exist within the genuine opposition. The established political parties, to different degrees, can be considered a loyal opposition insofar as their work is to both carry out the policy directives of the executive monarchy and to buttress it in terms of projecting a democratic image of the political system.

³⁴ Peter Seeberg, “Union for the Mediterranean: Pragmatic Multilateralism and the Depoliticization of EU-Middle Eastern Relations”, in *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 2010), p. 287-302.

³⁵ Immaculada Szmolka, “Inter- and Intra-Party Relations in the Formation of the Benkirane Coalition Governments in Morocco”, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (September 2015), p. 654-674.

In order to participate in the party system, whether to influence choices or simply derive material benefits, all political parties have to accept the primacy of the King over policy matters and bow to his executive nature. This means that “red lines” cannot be crossed, which prevents even the most “radical” among them to fundamentally challenge the way in which the system operates and to refuse the narrative of democratisation in progress. As highlighted earlier, the 20 February movement did cross red lines, although not the ultimate one calling for an end to monarchical rule. Such crossing of red lines – demanding a genuine constitutional monarchy, for instance – united a number of different political and social actors, but outside of this common goal there was not much unity around the institutional shape of a future Morocco or around the strategies to get there. While it is true that the divide and rule strategies put in place by the monarchy are significant, they work because genuine opposition actors allow them to be successful through their lack of unity. The sharp ideological divide that we find among genuine opposition actors – as opposed to the rather artificial one between established political parties – is detrimental to radical change. The split between the Justice and Charity group and more secular associations and movements within the larger 20 February coalition is indicative of this. In addition, there are also powerful centrifugal divides that prevent greater unity and coordination, such as the urban/rural one. Centre/periphery tensions undermined the coherence and national reach of the 20 February movement, which remained a largely urban phenomenon. As Bergh and Rossi-Doria underline, contacts between the 20 February movement and protestors in rural areas in the High Atlas were sporadic.³⁶ The absence of organisational connections influences negatively the discursive one, allowing the regime to deal with challenges separately and therefore more easily. Similar dynamics have been observed in the Rif³⁷ and in Western Sahara.³⁸

Finally, one should consider the disempowering impact of neo-liberal economics on ordinary citizens and workers. From a macroeconomic perspective, as outlined earlier, Morocco has grown its economy considerably, but the much hoped for trickle-down effect has not occurred. Quite the contrary seems to have happened, with pauperisation of large sectors of the population due to the erroneous implementation of liberalisation policies with its trading partners.³⁹ In fact, working conditions have worsened, underemployment has risen and unemployment has remained stubbornly stable. This generated a significant level of localised protest, suggesting widespread opposition to these policies, and the 20 February movement

³⁶ Sylvia I. Bergh and Daniele Rossi-Doria, “Plus ça Change? Observing the Dynamics of Morocco’s ‘Arab Spring’ in the High Atlas”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (July 2015), p. 198-216, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1033900>.

³⁷ Ángela Suárez Collado, “Territorial Stress in Morocco: From Democratic to Autonomist Demands in Popular Protests in the Rif”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (July 2015), p. 217-234.

³⁸ Irene Fernández-Molina, “Protests under Occupation: The Spring inside Western Sahara”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (July 2015), p. 235-254.

³⁹ Fawaz Yusuf, “A Structural Change Analysis of EU-Moroccan Trade Liberalisation and Economic Development between 1995 and 2010”, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (June 2014), p. 413-432.

seized on them to swell its ranks. However, such neo-liberal policies have also undermined intra- and inter-community solidarity as well as weakening the social bonds among workers in different sectors of the economy, who compete intensely to secure better deals, to the detriment of others, to protect themselves from the worst effects of neo-liberalism. Matt Buehler for instance analyses in detail how public service unions employed the 2011 demonstrations strategically to secure a better deal for their members rather than becoming “politicised” and attempting to make their demands part of the wider struggle to secure better conditions and pay for all workers. As Buehler argues, “leveraging their positions as operators of public institutions, these unionists exploited the unrest to strategically advance their interests.”⁴⁰

3. What does the future hold?

Given the number of factors that work in favour of the monarchy, it is quite difficult to see the possibility of anything but the persistence of authoritarian rule in the guise of perpetual democratisation. Political parties have been effectively co-opted while the genuine opposition, which is quite active in the realm of civil society, finds it extremely difficult to cooperate on crucial domestic issues because of ideological or territorial divisions. The international community is pleased with the survival of the monarchy as a bulwark against regional instability, and ordinary Moroccans are likely to be grateful that the Kingdom has not plunged into the violence that many of its neighbours are experiencing, leaving them reluctant to go beyond what are now routinised protests. Macroeconomic indicators remain solid despite the global slowdown, and Morocco has managed to ride out the international financial crisis reasonably well. Last but not least, the reforms the monarchy undertook in all sorts of different sectors – economic, political, social and religious – seem to have satisfied for the moment a sufficient number of constituencies as to safeguard its reign despite their shortcomings. In short, there is no indication of the imminent or medium-term demise of the political system.

And yet, the problems that were at the root of the 2011 demonstrations are still present and the political, economic and administrative reforms put in place to deal with some of them have yet to deliver tangible results. From an economic perspective, the launch of a new wave of massive infrastructural projects such as the port of Nador West continues to be one of the main drivers of development, along with the attempt to attract mass tourism to the country and the diversification of energy production. All this, however, is unlikely to put a dent in unemployment and underemployment. If anything, the rate of unemployment has increased slightly since 2011 (it is estimated at 9 percent for 2015) and the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, remains quite high.⁴¹ In addition, the rural population

⁴⁰ Matt Buehler, “Labour Demands, Regime Concessions: Moroccan Unions and the Arab Uprisings”, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2015), p. 88.

⁴¹ See the table of Gini coefficients for all the countries in the world at Human Development

is still suffering from high rates of illiteracy, limited access to basic services and low levels of social mobility. In short, neo-liberal economic reforms implemented to keep the budget deficit in check, attract foreign investments, privatisations and inserting the country more deeply into the global economy have still not managed to “lift all boats.” In fact quite a few boats seem to be sinking and local protests against the more deleterious side effects of such reforms are an indication of the dissatisfaction of sectors of the population. For the moment such discontent can be, and is being, managed reasonably easily through the usual combination of low-level repression, co-optation and concessions.

From an institutional point of view, the new constitution does not seem to have changed the political dynamics in place. The palace still retains considerable powers and the PJD-led government is quite limited in what it can actually achieve in terms of radical change. The recent government reshuffle and the results of the municipal elections of 2015 suggest that even the PJD has lost its ideological drive and prefers instead a comfortable arrangement of subordination to the monarchy, just like the other major parties have done in the past. The clientelistic vote in the countryside for the palace-sponsored party PAM is further evidence of the monarchy’s grip on the political process and its main institutions. The rather disturbing wave of imprisonments, fines and harassment of journalists, human rights activists and public intellectuals does not seem to have generated much reaction among ordinary citizens, highlighting the confidence the monarchy and the security apparatus have of their ability to deliver arbitrary justice against those accused of undermining the stability of the state. However, opposition politics is still present in civil society and different groups, particularly the Justice and Charity group, retain significant popular support and constitute an obstacle to the absolute predominance of the King.

While present conditions do not suggest change, the weakening of the traditional instruments available to the monarchy to control the country suggest that the future might not be as rosy for the palace and that the “perils of an incomplete liberalisation” persist.⁴² The decreasing relevance of the religious and historical legitimacy of the monarchy to rule might further empower political and social actors that do not consider it problematic to either “constitutionalise” it in order to limit it or get rid of it entirely through a process of radical change. Ordinary citizens seem increasingly to support the monarchy either out of fear or patronage benefits. The decreasing ability to offer selective inducements and punishments to social and political groups suggests, however, that if the genuine opposition were to find some sort of common ideological ground and shared vision of the future, the monarchy might have a difficult time withstanding the pressure on it to transform into a real constitutional monarchy. The Tunisian experience, where Islamist and secular/nationalist forces managed to cooperate to turn the country

Reports: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/income-gini-coefficient>.

⁴² Anouar Boukhars, “Political violence in North Africa. The Perils of Incomplete Liberalization”, cit.

into a functioning liberal democracy, might provide the inspiration necessary to work out a similar agreement in Morocco. It took Tunisian parties and civil society groups a considerable amount of time to come to terms with each other in the name of a common platform and shared vision of the institutions Tunisia should have. Yet in the end a compromise was reached and the Ben Ali regime was unable to break it. Morocco's experience might be closer to that of Tunisia than that of Egypt in this respect. Finally, the depoliticisation from which the monarchy has benefited can be more easily transformed into extra-institutional and extra-parliamentary activism, with significant repercussions for the order and security of the country at a time when economic benefits are not being more widely distributed. For the moment we are far from having a revolutionary situation in Morocco because the divisive impact of economic reforms, together with low-level repression, divisions within the genuine opposition and the technocratisation of politics, contribute to the persistence of authoritarian rule in the absence of a clear and workable alternative, but, as Sadiki pointed out in 1997, if the "democracy of the bread" does not deliver, in the long term demands for a democracy of the vote will grow louder.⁴³ The Moroccan economic and political systems are unlikely to be sustainable in such a long term. The monarchy holds the key to render it so, and for its own sake it had better begin delivering reasonably soon. For Western international actors, the aftermath of the Arab Spring has presented them with the same dilemma they faced before the uprisings. Pushing for greater democratisation and more genuine political participation might lead countries on the Southern bank to implode, leading to further instability. Supporting authoritarian rule, particularly when, as in Morocco, it presents itself under the guise of slow but steady democratisation, is still the default position. The EU has been particularly active in providing Morocco with the necessary cover to re-establish its rule, and the monarchy is lauded for its ability to provide stability, create a more inclusive politics and continue on the path to economic reforms. The provision of technocratic assistance on which the norms and values of the EU can piggyback is the mechanism of choice to deal with Morocco and most of the Arab world.⁴⁴ This is unlikely to change. The question then is not only whether this policy is sufficient to ensure European interests, but also whether it is sufficiently visionary in the longer term to take into account the needs of ordinary Moroccans. There are significant doubts about this and the EU should think more strategically about the kind of Mediterranean it wants to see. Technocratic help to grow the Moroccan economy and to help state institutions to function better without taking into account how all of this translates on the ground – higher unemployment, worsening working conditions, increasing inequality and social frustrations – is self-defeating in the long run. If the overall objective for the EU is to create an area of shared prosperity, as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership clearly states, it needs to be more assertive with the Moroccan monarch and his government about the necessity to implement genuine political reforms

⁴³ Larbi Sadiki, "Towards Arab Liberal Governance: From the Democracy of Bread to the Democracy of the Vote", in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (March 1997), p. 127-148.

⁴⁴ Tina Freyburg et al., *Democracy Promotion by Functional Cooperation. The European Union and Its Neighbourhood*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

and, crucially, revisit its model of economic development. The latter in particular is very difficult to do because of the way in which the EU thinks ideologically about economic growth and development and because of the interests it has in subsuming the Moroccan economy for the EU's benefit.

When it comes to political institutions, the EU should press for the setting up of a Tunisia-style constituent assembly charged with designing a new constitution, allowing all elected representatives (including the ones the Justice and Charity group might put forth) to discuss all sorts of matters without monarchical limits being imposed. This would generate a genuine debate about how Moroccans envision their future. When it comes to the economy, EU resources and investments should prioritise sustainable job creation, moving away from mega-projects and the immediate economic interests of the EU, ending for instance agricultural protectionism.

This is unlikely to occur, but then surprise should not be feigned when another round of revolts hits Morocco. It is unlikely to happen now or tomorrow, but what has been tried for the last decade and a half has not worked and there is no real indication that it will work in the near future. The patience of ordinary Moroccans will at some stage run out.

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