

MOROCCO'S EXCEPTIONALISM THE 2011 UPRISING AND BEYOND

Marco Centaro

UNINT - Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma
Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses
(Società Italiana di Geopolitica Project)



International Institute for Global Analyses

Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses
Piazza dei Navigatori 22, 00147 – Rome (Italy)

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses unless explicitly stated otherwise.

© 2024 Vision & Global Trends - International Institute for Global Analyses
© 2024 Marco Centaro

First Edition: May 2024

Analytical Dossier 03/2024 - ISSN 2704-6419

www.vision-gt.eu
info@vision-gt.eu

MOROCCO'S EXCEPTIONALISM THE 2011 UPRISING AND BEYOND

Marco Centaro

UNINT - Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma
Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses
(Società Italiana di Geopolitica Project)



Vision & Global Trends - International Institute for Global Analyses

MOROCCO'S EXCEPTIONALISM: THE 2011 UPRISING AND BEYOND

Marco Centaro

Discussing the Arab Spring is surely no easy task, mainly because scholars face enormous difficulties when trying to identify limits, dimensions, and approaches to such a phenomenon. For the last decade, it has even been discussed whether the same definition could apply to the wave of unrest that shook the MENA region or not. Much of the criticism complained both about the instabilities having different natures in all Countries involved, and the choice of "Arab" as a catch-all epithet (the profound wedges across the region would undermine the identification of a united and single geographical entity).

Thus, this paper aims to analyze the dynamics of the specific uprisings that characterized Morocco's "exceptional" 2011 experience, for they can explain many deep aspects of the country's domestic mechanisms.

Dealing with the Arab Spring in Morocco, in fact, comes with a statement that defines it as an exception compared to its neighbors, as, indeed, the phenomenon and the consequences remained relatively limited in the country. Understanding the many reasons that drove Moroccans to take to the streets and the following result in the institutional structure requires acknowledging the domestic political and economic situation and gazing at the regional balances in the same period. To do so, it is first necessary to comprehend the country's institutional and social framework, then later move to the description of the unrest that specifically characterized Morocco's experience.

Today, the Kingdom is a constitutional, democratic, and parliamentary monarchy, with origins well-known by a traditionally nationalist population. Moreover, it boasts features and balances absent in many other regional realities, especially under the religious lens.

King Mohammed VI is the 23rd monarch of a dynasty (the Alawites) that traces its provenance directly to the Prophet Muhammad. Given the complex context of religious and political overlapping in Islam, this gifts the King a strong precedent that justifies much of his current power and credibility. The existing allegiance (*bay'a*) between him, the *Amir al Mu'minin* (Commander of the faithful), and his *Ummah* (community, the population) constitutes an old social and religious

institution¹. Plus, a new and different picture takes shape if such a cultural background is coupled with Morocco's history. Throughout the centuries, the various dynasties that ruled across its lands made it a strong and prestigious empire capable of maintaining its independence for centuries, falling under the French and Spanish protectorate only for a few decades in the XX century. The rulers that succeeded over time were always considered the core of national unity and pride, a legacy that was further consolidated by the 1956 independence. Such a framework created (and still maintains) an environment in which the King centralizes the major effort for domestic stability, as in the case of a revolution the entire population and the whole system would fall into chaos.

Such a premise helps to explain why the Moroccan case study constitutes partially an exception, especially when the main banner of the 2011 protest was not calling to overthrow the entire system (the case of Egypt and Tunisia), but rather demanding the King major changes in a political establishment perceived as extremely corrupted and isolated from the population². Unlike other regional realities, the King constitutes the main character of institutional and national life. Without his presence, Morocco would lose most of its identity.

However, at some point, Morocco partially aligned with its neighbors in the Maghreb, particularly after implementing pervasive neoliberalism late in the XX century. Indeed, many developing countries in the MENA region were anxiously trying to exploit the new credit lines that the West opened in the aftermath of the Cold War³.

This constitutes a worth mentioning element, because usually, in post-colonial realities, neoliberalism leads to a form of liberalization and privatization suddenly legitimizing economic and social inequalities, an expression of corrupted and neo-patrimonial practices that lead to a wealth concentration detrimental to the labor force. This evolutive pattern affected Morocco as several other regional actors, though without representing a fundamental structural pillar of the country's system. Put differently, it means that the King (Hassan II, and from 1999 Mohammed VI), even if he was allowing a new organizational paradigm to modify the domestic environment, was not

¹ <https://www.eurasiareview.com/27052023-morocco-politics-culture-society-and-economy-analysis/>

² <https://carnegie-mec.org/2011/02/17/2011-looks-difficult-for-morocco-pub-42683>

³ C. Sbailò, *Diritto Pubblico dell' Islam Mediterraneo: linee evolutive degli ordinamenti nordafricani contemporanei: Marocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libia, Egitto*, Milano, Wolters Kluwer, 2015 (I ed.).

questioning the main elements that distinguished Morocco. Instead, it represented a shortcut (pursued together with Egypt, Tunisia, etc.) to develop faster and competitively. Hence, the country exposed itself to the same risks that neoliberalism can entail anywhere else, including its neighbors.

Perceiving such justified and corrupted practices is what mostly drives populations to revolt. The mechanism is simple: high levels of growth also come with huge investments in urbanization, infrastructure, and education even though, in reality, all these three sectors are those that more than all become symbols of inequalities, for only small slices of the population would benefit from them. From a sociological perspective, these discrepancies within societies are mainly something that dwells in the popular perception, rather than in indicators that can be quantitatively estimated.

A clear example is given exactly by the growth process that Morocco was experiencing in 2011 and before: a strong development rate capable of resisting the 2008 global economic crisis (in 2011 Morocco's economy grew by 5,5% compared to 2010) and effective policies and reforms aimed at reducing economic and social inequalities⁴ (in 1992 and 1996, as an example, King Hassan II reviewed the constitution to establish a strengthened bicameral parliament and to create a Constitutional Council⁵, while in 2004 King Mohammed VI radically reshaped the *Moudawana*, the family code, to empower and equalize the role of women⁶).

Despite a healthy manufacturing sector, increasing tourism, and a steady export rate, Moroccans were unsatisfied with the path the Monarchy and the political establishment traced. As many experts have noticed, such a process was too vertically guided compared to the participation demands of the population. Unemployment was still high (particularly among graduates and youth), poverty was decreasing but rampant (especially in rural areas), and corruption was evident.

⁴ <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/52/mcs071911>

⁵ <https://constitutionnet.org/country/morocco>

⁶ <https://www.sdg16.plus/policies/family-code-morocco/#:~:text=In%202004%2C%20Morocco%20reformed%20its,equality%20between%20men%20and%20women.>

Plus, given the tendentially liberal environment, many were stressing high limitations in different fields of social and political freedoms, especially when referring to the possibility of expressing dissent⁷.

Since the country appeared to perform well, but gave benefits to very few, the population felt disillusioned about the widely echoed narrative of a great and prosperous nation.

Such a background was not limited just to Morocco, thus constituting one of the major causes for the unrest that hardly hit the MENA region in 2011, involving, eventually, even the Kingdom. The only difference, though, resides in the fact that while in other countries the people stressed abuses and illiberal practices that were coming directly from the State itself, in Morocco the turmoil only called for profound, but not fundamental, reforms. Underlining this detail is vital, as it entails that elsewhere the protest intended to revolutionize the entire system, while in Morocco the masses were violently asking the King to reform it, without questioning the legitimacy of its status.

For this reason, starting from February 20, the protest awoke pushing the King to promote major changes that would later transform Morocco into a stronger constitutional monarchy, thus limiting the power of the ruler while reforming the form of government to enhance representativity and implement accountability for the executive⁸.

The upheaval lasted five months and gathered all citizens willing to express dissatisfaction towards the many social and economic dysfunctionalities, being them the limits in freedom, women's downgraded condition, unemployment, or corruption. All these complaints fell into the larger February 20 Movement, the group that organized the revolts and got the name from the same day on which it called the first public protest.

The Movement did not avert the harsh response launched by security forces, with which protesters engaged in several clashes that eventually resulted in (few) casualties. Even though the level of the turmoil was not comparable to that of other countries, it spread into many cities across Morocco witnessing the participation of enormous masses, hence worrying the political establishment.

⁷ <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/unrealised-demands-moroccos-20-february-movement>

⁸ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-arab-spring>

having reconstructed the multifaceted frameworks that led to the 2011 phenomenon, analyzing the course of events and their features in the Moroccan case study explains much of its supposed exceptionalism, visible both in the abovementioned premises and the following management of the turmoil.

The two major actors analyzed are the King and the February 20 Movement, both presenting specific behavioral patterns.

Starting from the latter, it was immediately clear that the group lacked vital elements able to present it as a credible and influential political force. The generalized and heterogeneous fabric of the movement was giving it, in the first place, a strong influence among the population, though hampering a unification process able to translate the various demands into a structured political program or a defined ideology. By the end of the day, the protest was calling for change, but could not present itself as a new organization able to interact with the political establishment and leverage its large number of supporters.

Lacking a specific purpose and missing a prepared leadership able to convey the anger into actual reform, the next move, then, was the King's.

King Mohammed VI, at that time, could already boast significant precedents in dealing with civil society's needs, since he was the main advocate for previous developments made by Morocco in many different fields. Being the major arbiter in the Kingdom's society, he immediately exploited the isolation of the movement to announce a constitutional reform and an increase in public subsidies.

Such a move was described as a continuation of the already ongoing process of growth experienced by the country, even though the narrative was not sponsored randomly: it had the double purpose of draining the protest of its major reason of being and promoting a stability maneuver to the international audience.

Learning from the neighbors' tragic outcomes, the King prevented parties and labor unions from solidarizing with the masses, engaging in talks with their leaders to better understand how to tackle

the situation⁹. The result was a huge reform that eventually reshaped the institutional structure, though being described by the same Movement as a façade.

Presented in June for a general referendum with only two weeks of notice, the new constitution broadened the range of freedoms, recognized the Amazigh language and culture, strengthened the independence of the judiciary sector, conceded more space to legislative and executive powers, and effectively implemented a Constitutional Court.

Furthermore, after promulgating the new fundamental charter, the King announced new parliamentary elections to be held in November of the same year. The Movement, again, stressed that the brand-new institutional configuration could not produce effective and fair change, thus launching a campaign to boycott the elections. Eventually, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won the majority of the seats and later formed a new government that had to be approved by the King (the Monarch nominates the Prime Minister and its Ministers after being selected by the winning party).

The major goal of King Mohammed VI was then achieved, as the immediate reform process served the purpose of delegitimizing the protest to soothe the general atmosphere in the country. Moreover, opening the system to the demanded change helped to present Morocco as a more stable and evolving environment, in which problems exist, but are then solved thanks to the wisdom and prudence of its leader.

These smart maneuvers of the King, as said, were condemned by protesters, as in reality they could not stop corruption and implement a healthier environment in which growth would be achieved and its benefits globally shared. Regardless of these calls, the King still saved his image and undermined the Movement's credibility: the reforms were implemented, and it was undeniable that Morocco was already experiencing admirable development, according to general statistics.

Nonetheless, these balances represent the main reasons for Morocco's exceptionalism, for its singularity emerged during the uprisings as a direct consequence of the country's institutional

⁹ <https://longreads.tni.org/the-february-20-movement-in-morocco>

framework. Even if the nation has faced many tense moments throughout history, the Monarchy revealed to be a cardinal element, possessing decisive influence and trust that can ultimately pacify the situation.

The same fact that the protests addressed their calls toward the King without delegitimizing his role can alone underline the big difference between Morocco and Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and so on.

The latter group of countries could not deal with the extreme dissatisfaction in a dialectical manner, as the protesters rallied against the same existence of the regimes. Such a force demonstrated by the masses represents another element of distinction since it was unifying enough to gain momentum and overthrow the power system, though lacking serious abilities in the subsequent process of institution-building. The February 20 Movement also tried to address real discontent, but eventually could not institutionalize and take credible action to negotiate with the establishment. After gaining temporary visibility it later dissolved into a smaller group of activists.

In conclusion, Morocco's exceptionalism comprises many structural elements that in a certain way can assure stability. The King remains, even today, a key and unquestioned actor able to intervene and undermine any effort to destabilize the national system.

Local or regional protests, over time, still occur as grassroots small-scale uprisings that quickly vanish without an effective political contribution. On paper, the reforms implemented in numerous fields depict a pleasant and just image of Morocco, even if they present, in reality, grey zones that enable authorities to violate them. Consequently, this creates an environment in which the norm is not always clear. The major effect is to hamper the possibility of having new movements able to gather consensus over specific topics, as they would be stopped by the fact that they would protest over rights or policies that are, instead, valid and implemented.

Such shady balances are the reason why some grades of instability persist in Morocco, as demonstrated in 2011 (and later in 2016 during the Riffian unrest¹⁰), but, at the same time, they set the same conditions for re-establishing the social and political order.

¹⁰ <https://blog.prif.org/2021/02/19/ten-years-after-the-arab-spring-how-stable-is-morocco-really/>

The 2011 case describes many of the mechanisms that shape Morocco's domestic environment even today, including the exceptionalism that eventually helped open a way out from the risk of collapse that was ravaging across the Middle East and North Africa.

The message addressed by the King to the nation (and abroad) was that Morocco is a progressivist country, ready to develop and take a step back in favor of its population, meaning that as long as the King leans toward its people internal chaos will never explode.

Even if this assumption carries some truth, it must not be forgotten that most of the time the reforms are valid on paper, giving the authorities a wide range of behavior within the multiple grey zones that affect several sectors of Moroccan society.

Plus, the notorious inequalities are still quite evident, as the country undeniably grows at two different paces.

Despite the great progress that the Kingdom is experiencing, widening social gaps and unclear policies bring up new risks of deeper dissatisfaction, thus failing to prevent 2011-like scenarios from happening again.

Morocco is currently considered a stable country, for it can boast a specific mechanism that assures "checks and balances", but what needs to be monitored is the capacity of this peculiar device to develop and keep up with the mutating environment of its society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sbailò, C, *Diritto Pubblico dell' Islam Mediterraneo: linee evolutive degli ordinamenti nordafricani contemporanei: Marocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libia, Egitto*, Milano, Wolters Kluwer, 2015 (I ed.).

SITOGRAHY

<https://blog.prif.org/2021/02/19/ten-years-after-the-arab-spring-how-stable-is-morocco-really/>

<https://carnegie-mec.org/2011/02/17/2011-looks-difficult-for-morocco-pub-42683>

<https://constitutionnet.org/country/morocco>

<https://euromedrights.org/publication/the-moroccan-family-code-moudawana/>

<https://longreads.tni.org/the-february-20-movement-in-morocco>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/2/22/moroccos-february-20-movement-demands-still-alive>

<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/52/mcs071911>

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-arab-spring>

<https://www.newarab.com/analysis/unrealised-demands-moroccos-20-february-movement>
<https://www.sdg16.plus/policies/family-code-morocco/#:~:text=In%202004%2C%20Morocco%20reformed%20its,equality%20between%20men%20and%20women.>

Marco Centaro - International Security master's student at the University of International Studies of Rome with a Bachelor degree in Investigation and Security Sciences (thesis on Travel Security). Currently performing an exchange program at Université Internationale de Rabat and collaborating with Vision and Global Trends through the production of reviews and analyses



Vision & Global Trends - International Institute for Global Analyses

www.vision-gt.eu

info@vision-gt.eu