



THE MOROCCAN SPRING

By Ahmed Charai

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CASABLANCA--Across the Arab world, we see mass demonstrations, armed revolts or messy, uncertain transitions to democracy -- except in Morocco. That North African Arab country was thunderstruck when its king, in a June 17 speech, calmly called for a new constitution that transfers almost all power from the monarch to an elected prime minister. The people will vote on a referendum in July on a new constitution.

The king proposed to combine an elected parliament with broad powers with a monarchy limited by a new constitution, much like that of the European democracy. Just as in Western European nations, the prime minister will be elected by whichever party wins the most votes. The prime minister will appoint and dismiss all cabinet ministers and regional government officials, including the governors. Since Morocco's independence in 1956, these powers were reserved to the king.

The parliament, which had a more limited grant of powers from the king when it was created in 1997, will now have the same powers as the assemblies of the world's great democracies. Parliament can write laws, levy taxes, convene hearings, establish a budget and hold bureaucrats accountable. If bicameralism is maintained, the second chamber, a kind of senate that is elected indirectly, will not have the power to dissolve the government.

While many observers expected the king to announce a new power-sharing relationship with the parliament, few expected him to go this far, this fast to full democracy. The new constitution moves far beyond striking a new balance of power—it makes Morocco a wholly modern state.

The new constitution also establishes the primacy of international conventions and U.N. treaties, and, thus the necessity of adapting Moroccan laws to them. This is a huge step forward, especially for the rights of women. For too long, the full recognition of women's equality has been mired in religious objections. Now that will change.

The king also called for a fully independent judiciary to combat corruption and safeguard human rights.

The proposed constitutional changes are the latest in a long line of pro-democracy developments. Morocco has a history of political pluralism. The kingdom has 12 major and regional political parties, an independent and free press, and human rights protections.

Morocco also has a record of respecting elections. The March 1998 election brought to power a coalition of center-left parties, known as the Socialist Union of Popular Forces—the first time an opposition party took power after an election in the Arab world. As for past abuses of human rights, the government acknowledged those wrongs and initiated a process called reconciliation in 2002. Victims are being compensated and wrong-doers punished.

These reforms were hailed in their time, but ten years later, other more ambitious demands are being heard. When the 2007 elections were marked by a record low turnout (37 percent), the king and the government realized that more needed to be done. The Socialist Union of Popular Forces, once again in opposition, called for a constitutional monarchy at its 2008 party convention. Calls for democratic reform accelerated in 2011 following the largely peaceful demonstrations, known as the movement of February 20.

Unlike in other Arab countries, protesters did not call for the fall of the monarchy, but simply for the end of absolutism and corruption. The protests were continuous, almost weekly, and largely peaceful. The police did not intervene. Instead, the demonstrators hoped to exert a calm, steady pressure—much like Martin Luther King’s nonviolent protests in 1960s America.

Only under the leadership of Al Adl Wal Ihssane, a radical Islamic group, did the protests become violent and the police swarm in. One protester died. The reaction of the king was telling. He immediately ordered the National Brigade of the Judicial Police, the governing body of the national police, to investigate police brutality.

Most political parties support the king’s proposed constitutional changes, but two forces seemed to be gathering strength in the public protests: the Islamists of Al Adl Wal Ihssane and the Maoists of Annahj. The former are in principle banned but tolerated, the latter are a legal party. Both essentially oppose the existence of the monarchy.

The Islamists hope to reestablish the seventh century caliphate and aim to use democracy to achieve their ends. In the long-term, however, a multi-party democracy will not exist in their Islamic caliphate. Their literature speaks of denying the power of the parliament to make law, replacing it with a judiciary that rules through unchanging Sharia law. Meanwhile, the Maoists want an anti-capitalist revolution.

These two movements are a distinct but vocal minority, although Al Adl Wal Ihssane has a vast membership and a disciplined hierarchy.

The king, by heeding the demands for democratic reform by the February 20 movement, has created a channel to direct the energies of the demonstrators away from extremism. Referenda can be more powerful than police batons.

Thanks to Morocco’s unique history, the king’s gambit may well succeed. In Egypt and Tunisia, which had small, fractured and repressed political classes, the only thing that demonstrators agreed on was the departure of their ruler. By contrast, Morocco has a vast and vibrant political class to debate and shape the future of the country. Violence is the last refuge of the voiceless; in Morocco, people are free to gather, publish dissenting views and call radio programs or use online social media to express themselves. So violence is unnecessary and rare.

Nearly every one will have a say in the debate over the constitutional referendum planned for July and offer counter-proposals for new political institutions. But the debate will be had with strong opinions, not Molotov cocktails.

The Moroccan experience stands as a model for the rest of Arab world, with peaceful yet dramatic political change coming from the top and bottom of society simultaneously. It took almost 15 years of steady reforms and the enlargement of civil society to get to this turning point. This embrace of full-bodied democracy is the hard-won return on a long-term investment. Other Arab leaders would feel safer if they made similar, patient investments. It is not too late to start.

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