

The gradual awakening of the Moroccan people

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The wave of confrontation churning through the Arab world came late to Morocco.

It was only on February 20 that the first demonstrations against the regime took place. Announced in advance, they attracted some 8,000 people in Casablanca and Rabat. Police dispersed them with brutal force.

The organizers — intellectuals, trade unionists and young people — explained in their call that the initiative was peaceful and not aimed at the overthrow of the regime. “Less power to the monarchy” and “The King shall reign and not rule” were the timid slogans heard most often.

Two weeks later, on March 9, King Mohamed VI gave a speech that the media greeted with enthusiasm.

Some newspapers characterized the monarch’s speech as “revolutionary,” establishing a basis for a “new monarchy.”

Analysts considered liberals said they saw in his speech a real program that laid out “the path to democracy.”

What did the young monarch say or promise to justify such euphoria?

Very little, almost nothing.

He changed some ministers, created a Consultative Commission on Regionalization and instructed it to prepare a revision of the Constitution. He praised his government’s work, but clarified that, given the popular aspirations, he proposed directing the system toward a parliamentary democracy, delegating powers over time to a prime minister. At a press conference, the chairman of the Commission said it will propose three amendments to the Constitution: repealing the governors’ control of regional councils, allocating legislative powers to the regional presidents and taking measures for the benefit of women.

Praises continued for the king in newspapers, on TV and radio. But after a few days the media gave voice to the legal opposition and there were those who defined the regime as an anachronistic dictatorship.

A university in Casablanca held a roundtable discussion on the theme, “The ferment in Maghreb: logical and geopolitical perspectives.” The participants took different positions with regard to a question: Will Morocco be an exception in the Arab world?

In their answers, most scholars chose ambiguity. El Hossain, professor of International Relations, rejected the claim of exceptionalism [for Morocco], and affirmed that he fears the effects of the economic crisis and rising unemployment, and said he prefers the term “revolution” to “ferment” to characterize the events.

Brahim Fihri, President of the Amadeus Institute, pompously declared that Morocco is experiencing “a revolution of the king and of the people,” aimed toward “a new social contract” without ideological color. To him the danger comes exclusively from the Al Adl Wal Ibsade Islamist movement, which was preparing to “ambush” the king, because [to them] “Arab nationalism is evil.”

There was no intervention of a progressive character during this roundtable.

The language and style of political discourse in Morocco from the personalities there who talk of “revolution” remind Portuguese observers of that of the leaders of Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party in Portugal when reflecting on the Portuguese crisis. For them the solution to national problems will be a balanced redistribution of national wealth and the creation of “anti-poverty funds.”...

They obviously do not explain what to do to redistribute wealth in a society with a semi-feudal class structure, marked by outrageous inequities of the human condition.

On March 13 the police in Casablanca dispersed a demonstration of hundreds of people. There were many injured people. The French-language daily “Les Echos” devoted 16 lines to the subject, along with a photograph, and noted that most participants were Islamists of Al Adl Wal Ibsade.

Shopkeepers from the area, with whom I spoke, played down the protest. But for March 20, the group calling itself the February 20 Movement for Change called for new demonstrations. According to news agencies, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in 20 cities. The police did not intervene this time and the number of incidents was minimal.

The slogans were again weak. Most asked the king to fire the ministers involved in shady business deals. Some protesters wore yellow cards (not red) as a warning to the monarch. The February 20 Movement was becoming more radical, but slowly.

Criticism of despotism

Of the many criticisms of the system I read in the newspapers during my stay in Marrakech, the sharpest was by Fouad Abdelmouni, a human rights activist who, in the 1980s spent years in prison for advocating the proclamation of the republic.

Without mincing words he said in an interview that Morocco has been subjected to an absolute monarchy, carried out continuously in the form of a theocratic Caliphate.

In a head-on critique of politicians who advocate a transition in which the king, as the first of all believers, keeps a firm control of the state as an arbitrator, Abdelmouni demonstrated skepticism. He recalled that Mohamed VI, when he succeeded his father, announced in his inauguration speech that he would create a modern and democratic state. But he did not fulfill the promise and ruled as a despot.

Abdelmouni demands not an alteration of the articles of the Constitution now in force, but the convocation of a Constituent Assembly.

It could be concluded that he is a revolutionary intellectual suggesting radical solutions.

But his project consists of innocuous reformism. In his opinion, "A parliamentary monarchy is the only valid project today." Abdelmouni identified with the moderate position of the February 20 Movement and all those who contest monarchical absolutism, "from the Islamists to the Communists."

To understand what that means, one needs to know that the old Moroccan Communist Party changed its name and program twice. When it was legalized, it renounced Marxism. It is a caricature of the revolutionary party of Ben Barka, who was assassinated [in 1965 in Paris] at the behest of King Hassan II with the complicity of the French government. I met this party's leaders in Kabul at an International Conference. They supported the annexation of Western Sahara [by Morocco] and praised [Portuguese anti-communist] Mario Soares ...

Abdellatif Laâbi and a moment of truth

Moroccan intellectuals who support the February 20 Movement say they would like a profound change. But with few exceptions, their words are misleading. They actually want changes that impose little more than a democratic facade on the regime while maintaining almost intact the economic basis of a society that has grown up in the framework of a dependent and anachronistic capitalism.

This attitude appears clearly in the position taken by Abdellatif Laâbi, one of the most talented writers in the country.

This Francophone novelist, winner of the Goncourt Prize, welcomes the people's aspiration for freedom, dignity and social justice, condemns the privileged minority that has accumulated immense wealth, lashes out at their arrogance and expresses solidarity with the young and the mass of the excluded and exploited who are trapped in misery. Laâbi rejects the thesis of "Moroccan exceptionalism" advocated by the king and his epigones because - he stresses - democracy requires popular sovereignty.

But at the same time he praises the clarity of the monarch and his reformist spirit, concluding that "the moment of truth" has arrived in Morocco and that the only positive option will be "the installation of democracy on irreversible bases."

What bases? He explains: "The key to change remains, let's be clear, in the hands of the monarchy." For the king "is the judge, the guarantor of national unity, national security of the country and its citizens, of individual and collective freedoms, and of cultural and political pluralism." Only then, he believes, by decreeing a general amnesty and abolishing the death penalty, Morocco may follow "the example of other Arab peoples who took their destiny into their hands and entered into history through the big door."

He refrained from making the slightest criticism of the policy of maintaining a close alliance with the U.S., a policy that takes the form of vassalage.

Abdellatif Laâbi's concept of democracy is not very different from that outlined by Mário Soares, a deeply conservative politician masquerading as a socialist.

The almost reverential respect for the monarchy is not identifiable only in intellectuals. It is a sentiment shared by most of the population, especially in rural areas.

While in Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia the protests against autocratic regimes directly affects the discredited descendants of tribal chiefs that Britain put in power in artificial states, turning them into kings and emirs, that is not happening in Morocco. The opposition limits itself to asking Mohamed VI to reform a tyrannical and theocratic regime, "to reign without governing," the more daring voices suggest.

Will the king show himself as someone with the stature of a great statesman? No. He's a young man of average intelligence, who took power by inheritance. His father, Hassan II, was a despot who ruled as the medieval sultans did.

The Alaouite, unlike previous dynasties, who were Berbers, swell with pride regarding their Arab origins. Mohamed VI, like his father and grandfather, is said to descend from the Prophet Muhammad and, just as the French Louis XIV and the Prussian Frederick II did, he too claims to exercise power by divine right.

The Moroccan monarchy it is an aberration in the 21st century. It survives only because of the alienation of the masses in a country where semi-feudal social structures persist.

The thesis of the "Moroccan exception," under which Morocco will not be hit by the great wave of popular opposition that has swept the Arab world, however, is a slogan that distorts reality, invented by the ruling class.

The demonstrations of February 20, repeated in March, though timid, marked the beginning of a process for challenging the despotic power; they will certainly continue. Their course and the forms the struggle will take are not yet predictable, particularly considering the absence of a revolutionary party with roots in the masses.

But the awakening of the people of Morocco is a historical inevitability.

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