

Implications of Constitutional Reforms in Morocco

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It is true that the constitutional reforms - submitted to the King of Morocco by an appointed committee and voted in a referendum by 70% of the country's 13 million registered voters—have triggered an endless debate among the political elites of the country. Now, however, it is still not clear how the newly voted constitution will consolidate the Moroccan experience in the Arab world as a unique model for development, and whether it will contain the movements who have taken to the street in the haze of the so-called "Arab Spring". The implications of the modified constitution on political life and development process of the whole Moroccan society seem to be difficult to predict.

Implications on the Monarchy

King Mohammed VI has announced that the constitutional reforms will be comprehensive, promising to boost the powers of the government and to launch a process that will lead to the prevailing of constitutional law. Even when it limits the powers of the King and opens a new space of liberties, the modified constitution remains far from giving satisfaction to all forces operating on the political and social scene. The Islamist organization Justice and Charity, an organization working outside of the electoral process, and extreme Left minorities hijacked the youth-based February 20 movement to articulate a categorical refusal of involvement in the referendum, their contention being that the committee entrusted with the reforms should be chosen by the people, not appointed by the King. Thus formulated, the demands of the youth have been transformed from a mere social protest against lack of job opportunities and corruption stemming from royal cronies into a real challenging of the monarch's legitimacy. This turn, in the middle of the process of protests betrays the intention of the above-mentioned groups to inscribe the constitutional reforms within the logic of a revolution, instead of normal political reforms.

The main reason behind the large number of people turning out to decide on the referendum is the uneasy anticipation of the future of Morocco and Moroccans without the Monarchy. The Monarch enjoys a great deal of legitimacy among the Moroccans. By voting on the referendum, their main drive, in the first place, was to protect the legitimacy of the monarchy, the only conceivable framework for any reform in Morocco, at least for the time being. It was less a vote on the modified articles of the constitution than a resounding "yes" given to the King as the protector of unity and stability.

Away from the quibbles of the political elites over the content of the new constitution and the validity of this or that article, the majority of voters from the public consented to entrust the King with the urgent reforms. This said, King Mohammed VI enjoys a large space to comfortably maneuver in order to empower the agents of change capable of continuing the process of development necessary for the stability of the country. With the political parties at the side of the monarchy, the Kingdom will certainly contain the protest movement and curb the opposition rallying outside the established state legitimacy.

Most of the development programs projected by the constitution are part of a process already launched by the King since his accession to the throne. An in-depth analysis of the situation would reveal that the new constitution has come to frame an existing reality. The empowering of women, the boosting of parliamentary life under the surveillance of a watchful media, and the right of expression for linguistic minorities had been a subject of heated debate even before the proposed modification of constitution in Morocco.

When it comes to the Moroccan monarchy and reform it is true—as stated by a British traveler visiting Morocco in the nineteenth century—the institution of the king has always been ahead of time. It has always been keen to harmonize tradition and modernity and avoid appearing in the posture of revolutionary regime headless of the terms of international consensus. The philosophy of the new constitution betrays such a concern. On the one hand

the Kingdom strives to epitomize the perfect form of adherence to international law and world community. On the other hand, it clings to its specificities and traditions. In a nutshell, the vote on the referendum has confirmed the public's indefectible attachment to the monarchy as the only framework for political and social reform.

Implications on political parties

By contrast, the Moroccan political parties face difficult challenges after the referendum. It is true that the constitutional reforms limit the King's powers and boost those of the parties, called by dint of the new constitution to form government and choose the prime minister. Yet, these same parties - yesterdays advocates of constitutional change—seem reluctant to implement the change. Suffering from lack of credibility among the public, and unable to appeal to the youth and to recruit new dynamic forces likely to renew their elites, they feel that their privileges are at stake. This is why, instead of expressing commitment to the new constitution, they curiously engage in an unfruitful debate over the impediments to the implementation of "genuine" democracy, throwing the blame on the people, calling for "caution", etc... In a curious turn of events, the parties appear in the posture of enfeebled entities lurking behind the King, waiting—as the people's tongue says—for the whirlwind raised by February 20 movement and the Arab Spring to settle.

One wonders how the burned-out elites at the head of Moroccan parties would cope with the new challenges to Moroccan identity! The explicit recognition by the constitution of Amazigh, Hassani, Andalusian and Hebraic components as constituents of the Moroccan identity reshuffles the political arena. One of the serious challenges facing the parties is how to vie for new adherents and voters in the new ideological context, a context where the emphasis is on linguistic, ethnic, regional self-realization, more than on bygone ideals. The harmonizing of the new emerging identities and its merging in a new harmonic whole require new conceptual grounds and a lot of intellectual energy, which the parties cannot afford. Their contribution to the debate over the constitution has betrayed a frightening lack of intellectual perspective and a big yawning ideological vacuum. It is most unlikely that the dominant parties, from the extreme left-wing to the extreme right-wing, will provide alternatives to the current ideological divides.

Implications on February 20 movement

The leaders of February 20 movement tend to reiterate the following statement: "without the protests organized by February 20 movement the King would never have made a step towards constitutional reform". This is partly true. The demands for a constitutional, or parliamentary monarchy formulated by some political parties were not pressing, even if they were in the air in the Kingdom. One could say that one of the merits of February 20 movement is that it has contributed to quicken the pace of political reform in Morocco. To say otherwise, would be to pretend that Morocco is insulated from the upheavals of Arab Spring.

Now that the Moroccans have voted "yes" to the revised constitution, February 20 movement faces many challenges, not the least of which are the challenges of maintaining momentum. With every minute that passes the followers of the movement are taken over by doubt as to the outcome of the Arab Spring and street protests. It is dawning on lots of young people that the social media at their disposal are means of "deconstruction" but not of "reconstruction". While it is easy to use Facebook or twitter to weaken and fragilize the established regimes, it is not easy to use these same means to build a new consensus, to establish a new legitimacy. No wonder a vein of discontent is growing within the movement, leaving its followers in a state of disarray.

February 20 movement could be harnessed by the state as an important agent to resource jaded political parties and to optimize the process of fundamental reforms projected by the philosophy of the constitution. Many indices hint at such likelihood. Lots of young dynamics, realizing that all the protesters are not rallying under the same banner, have sketched a new moderate discourse in an attempt to reach out to the state, to rearticulate their initial demands, away from the radical nihilist discourse held by the left-extremists and of the Islamist organization Justice and Charity.

The choice made by the Justice and Charity Islamist movement to accept February 20 movement as a banner under which to vent their grief against the regime does not go without impact on their political rhetoric. Faced with the question whether they have no objection to fight at the side of secularists or atheists within February 20, they insist that what counts is the acceptance of others, of diversity, and the promotion of civil society and democracy. This tremendous twist at the level of political rhetoric will certainly have immense consequences on the Justice and Charity structure of ideas and concepts. It is not unlikely that large segments of the movement will press for more involvement in political life and in electoral processes. Because of their involvement within February 20, the Justice and Charity leaders find it difficult to dangle the promise of an Islamic Khilafa before their followers. Like the political parties, the organization is compelled to readjust its attitude to many fundamental issues. It is not enough to count on the Charisma of the leader to resolve the contradictions that emerged after the organization's encounter with other ideologies. There is hope that the acceptance of dialogue and readiness for compromise will turn the followers of the Justice and Charity into "political creatures" in the post-constitution era.

The Far Left Extremists, on another hand, indulge in desperate attempts to mobilize the poor of the suburbs in the hope of giving momentum to the protests. Being aware of the ideological chasm that separates them from the street, they refrain from articulating their claims, preferring to wrap them under the cloak of general idealism. Like the Justice and Charity, the Left Extremists face the challenge of remaining part of a discontented crowd without thereby making colossal ideological concessions that threaten the core of their identity.

Conclusion

If Morocco - unlike Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Libya—has succeeded in rallying the people around a new constitution as the only framework possible for change, it is because the monarchy enjoys a great deal of legitimacy, both inside Morocco and outside. In this respect, it is an interesting model of state in post-colonial Arab world. This does not mean that the Kingdom is absolutely safe from the raging tempest. Without serious effort to implement the promised reforms, Morocco could suffer a severe blow.

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