

Will Morocco's Reforms Point a Way Forward or Simply Succeed Alone?

Edward M. Gabriel

United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco, 1997-2001

Robert M. Holley

United States Foreign Service Officer (Ret.)

Disclaimer: *The authors currently advise the Kingdom of Morocco. The remarks expressed in this article are the authors' own views.*

Having both served in Morocco as representatives of the United States under President Clinton, and for the past ten years as advisers to the Kingdom of Morocco, we have witnessed firsthand the remarkable record of political and social transformation that Morocco has undergone over the past twenty years, and particularly since King Mohammed VI assumed the throne twelve years ago.

In thinking about recent events in Morocco, particularly the adoption of the new constitution proposed by King Mohammed VI, it is almost impossible to grasp the potential importance of these developments without placing them in the context of events in the larger Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The initial euphoria over the tumultuous events in the Arab world has given way to a more sober and, for many expert commentators, realistic assessment of just what the future may hold beyond new uncertainties. The split between democratic reformers and Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt grows more evident each day. Any new parliamentary election will witness a jostling among fractious moderates and conservatives whose platforms will still be subject to continued negotiations with the military.

Reform in Tunisia is moving ahead in fits and starts, again with uncertainty over the outcomes of the elections and further constitutional reforms. A stubborn Qaddafi regime in Libya has managed to survive the protestations of the United States and others of its opposition, and NATO, without strong US political and military leadership, seems unable to advance its mission. What a failure in the Libya mission might mean for the future of the North Atlantic alliance raises another set of troubling uncertainties itself.

Bashar al-Assad's regime continues its hardline response against the Syrian opposition as well as its onerous meddling in the affairs of its neighbors. Western criticism and threats of targeted sanctions take their toll on the Syrian people without effectively weakening the regime. Violence continues in Yemen where, as with their affiliates in North Africa, only the local branch of al-Qaeda seems to be gaining ground as the conflict stretches on. In Bahrain, the military backing of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has kept the lid on for now, but sectarian troubles continue to simmer near the boiling point.

And the regime in Tehran reportedly seeks to take advantage of these circumstances to further weaken its historic competitors in the region.

With oil prices rising, US media coverage of the Middle East barely focuses on key issues other than the Arab Spring, such as the dynamics between Israel and the Palestinians, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and how the United States can extricate itself from Iraq without serious sectarian violence that would further enhance Iranian influence. Of course, none of these issues has gone away and each has arguably become more serious than before given the new uncertainties of the region.

In the midst of this challenging environment but less noticed among Washington policymakers, is an opportunity for embattled Middle East policymakers to discover some fresh inspiration for the future of reforms in the MENA region. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI seized the opening provided by popular calls for reform to advance a thorough revision of the constitution and a call for new elections that will bring to office a new and significantly more empowered set of legislative and executive officials and establish an independent judiciary. The new constitution, approved on July 1, 2011, by an overwhelming turnout of more than 73 percent of Moroccan voters, included the following provisions:

- ◆ The Head of Government will be chosen from the party with the largest number of seats in parliament.
- ◆ The Head of Government will appoint Ministers and senior government officials.
- ◆ Morocco will be a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government based on sovereignty vested in the people as citizens.
- ◆ Government institutions will ensure the freedoms of citizens through good governance, human rights, and other basic inalienable rights of the people.
- ◆ A fully independent human rights organization with the power to investigate any alleged violations of law abridging human rights will be established.
- ◆ An independent judiciary will guarantee freedom from illegal searches or detention, privacy for communications and the right to a trial and a lawyer for anyone arrested.
- ◆ Substantial power will be transferred from the central government to elected local and regional officials, who will be more directly accountable to citizens.
- ◆ All citizens will be treated equally regardless of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed, with women treated equally with men.
- ◆ The primacy of international over domestic law through any treaty obligations accepted by Morocco will be observed.

- ◆ Amazigh (Berber) will be recognized as an official language of Morocco along with Arabic.
- ◆ The diversity of Moroccan society, with specific reference to, among others, the Jewish culture and population—surely unique in any Arab constitution—will be recognized.
- ◆ Mechanisms will be established to ensure oversight and accountability in the exercise of power in public office.

Some argue that the value of these reforms can only be judged by their implementation. While there is merit in this commentary, it implicitly diminishes the substantial record of previous reforms enacted in Morocco over the last twenty years, and most especially over the last twelve.

In his first major address to the people of Morocco on August 20, 1999, King Mohammed VI outlined his first priority—equal rights for women—in what was to become a series of social and political reforms that defined his vision for the future of the nation. In our view, the new constitution and Morocco’s credibility as a nation committed to democratic values that we Americans also embrace, should also be judged and supported in view of the reforms already adopted. These reforms include:

- ◆ *Women’s Rights*: Women’s rights are hardly a popular cause anywhere else in the region, but in Morocco this resulted in a full reform of the family code that granted unprecedented rights to women.
- ◆ *Equity and Reconciliation Commission*: This commission is the first and, so far, the only public commission of inquiry in the Arab world into the nation’s past human rights abuses. Heading this Equity and Reconciliation Commission is a group of former political prisoners. The commission held public town hall meetings and broadcast its hearings over public television. The State admitted its culpability and victims have been compensated.
- ◆ *A Coalition Government of Two Major Opposition Political Movements*: We came to Morocco right after the 1997 election, which resulted in a coalition government of the two major opposition political movements, some of whose most senior leaders had been exiled and under sentence of death.
- ◆ *Elections Certified as “Free and Fair”*: Subsequently, there have been two sets of national and local elections certified by international observers, including European and American, as “free and fair.”
- ◆ *Reforms to Ameliorate Poverty and Improve Socio-Economic Equality*: King Mohammed VI has made it a priority to tackle the issues of poverty and socio-economic equality. The National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) launched in 2005 provided substantial funding for more than 600 of the nation’s

poorest rural and urban communities to support public/private partnerships for sustainable economic growth. The social housing project is a special program designed to augment public housing and eliminate shanty-towns in the nation by 2015. Both programs have produced excellent results thus far.

The above reforms and others have qualified Morocco for a Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact with the US government, the first criterion of which is a proven track record on “good governance” issues and a demonstrable commitment to improving the daily lives of the nation’s most disadvantaged citizens.

Our overall point here is that the Moroccan exception is not a recent response to issues raised in the wake of the Arab Spring, but a thoughtful evolutionary process begun more than a decade ago. That is why it is real, why it will continue to advance further, and why it has become a model for the region.

In our view, Morocco’s record on these issues—and the seriousness of the constitutional revisions—argue for a fuller public embrace and robust set of supportive measures than the State Department has yet to put into place. We believe it also justifies a stronger initiative from Washington to partner with Morocco in order to take advantage of Morocco’s deeper understanding of the region and proven experience on how best to advance reforms in a conservative region where many remain resistant to such changes, especially if led by Western powers.

Obama administration programs, such as the US-North Africa Partnership for Economic Opportunity (NAPEO), foster private-public sector initiatives and intra-regional partnerships among entrepreneurs and companies. Similarly, the Deauville Partnership will help ensure economic stability that helps create jobs and rewards transparency. These are examples of targeted strategic assistance that can facilitate and underpin continued progress.

In addition, it is in America’s interests to help Morocco ensure that its vision for the future succeeds. The region needs both a local champion and a local success to help sustain the democratic vision that we all hope will become ascendant, rather than the regressive one we fear is gaining ground. This requires more than timid statements of encouragement couched in language that also implies some skepticism about Morocco’s intentions. Morocco is our oldest treaty ally, the first nation to recognize the independence of the United States in 1777, and has a record of commitment to the good governance that we hope will take hold elsewhere in the region. As such, Morocco deserves stronger support—in statements, policies and aid—from the United States based on its performance and long history of close relations; it is clearly in our interest to provide this three-pronged support without hesitation as it would benefit both Morocco and the region.

So where should we begin? Perhaps the most important element of the latest reforms, which would also have the greatest long-term impact on strengthening democratic systems, is the determination to transfer governing responsibilities from representatives of the central state to local elected officials. “Regionalization” is the term most often used in Morocco to place decision-making authority in the hands of officials locally elected, more

directly accountable to citizens, and to civil society organizations, which should expedite the implementation of the new constitution. This grassroots approach would take on the great challenge of building the human and structural capacity at the local level to exercise these responsibilities with competence and transparency. This project of capacity building at the local level is where the United States can put its own substantial expertise to work with its Moroccan partners. If such an effort were begun in the southern region of Morocco, commonly referred to the Western Sahara, it would have the added benefit of bringing greater autonomy to the local government there, something the United States has already endorsed as its policy to settle the Western Sahara dispute.

The events of the Arab Spring have once again reminded us that the Middle East and North Africa are still significant players in the global community. Whether one looks at the economics of oil and markets for investments or the political instability and challenges to security, no region merits more attention at this time. The King and people of Morocco have made a definite choice to invest in their future—to answer the need for greater economic growth, jobs, transparency, and power-sharing by undertaking a thorough revision of how the country is governed and to foster opportunities to remedy disadvantages within Moroccan society. Without oil and gas, and with limited resources, Morocco's efforts need to be matched by its friends in the international community. American know-how and global insights can be both an incentive and a support that can propel Morocco along its chosen path to becoming a more responsive, reliable, and progressive country. It is an investment worth making in a cherished and responsible ally in these times of great change.