

PolicyWatch #1381 : Special Forum Report

Human Rights in North Africa: The Moroccan Experience

Featuring Ahmed Herzenni, Kent Patton, and Les Campbell
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On June 6, 2008, Ahmed Herzenni, Kent Patton, and Les Campbell addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Herzenni is a former political prisoner who was appointed as president of Morocco's Advisory Council on Human Rights last year by King Muhammad VI. Mr. Patton is deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, responsible for promoting democratic reform and managing the Middle East Partnership Initiative. Mr. Campbell is director of the National Democratic Institute's democracy program for the Middle East and North Africa.

AHMED HERZENNI

Morocco's Advisory Council on Human Rights examines past abuses, helps with legal and judicial issues, and aims to spread awareness about the fate of political prisoners who were incarcerated during the reign of King Hassan II and are officially recorded as "missing." Of the many recommendations that the organization has made, the Council has been successful in making all Moroccans eligible for subsidized health care, representing a major break from the past (previously, many were not eligible due to their age).

Regarding "missing persons," major technological advances have been utilized to help identify recently recovered remains. There have been a number of revelations about secret detention centers, and now the Moroccan people can see where past abuses occurred. The detention centers were discovered in multiple provinces, and a major dismantling effort is currently under way.

The Council's objectives include making Morocco's judiciary system more independent, reforming the country's security services (which were abusive in the past), and incorporating human rights in the constitution. While there have been improvements in certain areas -- for example the improved rights of women -- there is still a lack of political balance in Morocco. The king retains too much power at the expense of weak political parties.

The issues that require most attention are civil and political rights. Our goal is to reach the highest universal standard for human rights in Morocco and not just settle for regional standards.

KENT PATTON

Human rights and democracy promotion have long been elements of U.S. foreign policy, as evidenced by annual government reports. When assessing these issues, the United States focuses on three indicators: regular, free and fair elections; representative, accountable institutions, including an independent judiciary; and an independent, nongovernmental sector, including civic associations and a free press.

Morocco is generally seen as a regional leader on human rights. In the last twelve months, there have been some major advances in the country. For instance, there have been revisions to the national code to include citizenship rights for women. Also, the Moroccan government collected and published statistics on domestic violence. It was a big step for the country to make it known to its citizens as well as the world that it faces

problems of domestic violence. However, governmental institutions remain weak, and since executive power is still in the hands of the monarch, Morocco needs to strengthen its political parties and increase voter turnout.

Regarding regional countries, Libya always seems to come in dead last on human rights, with neither independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) nor an electoral process. Next would be Tunisia, which has some basic representative institutions. Algeria also has some democratic institutions and a fairly free press.

The United States and Morocco will continue working together to improve and support human rights, and build stronger institutions.

LES CAMPBELL

Moroccans have a very strong and active civil society, with many NGOs watching over governmental and nongovernmental activity. A number of international organizations have sent informal missions to help monitor and observe elections, and support human rights. However, since the Moroccan government dislikes being monitored, multiple attempts to provide official international observation have been denied, and several NGOs have been harassed. Previously, NGOs did not have the authority or permission to assist the Moroccan people in improving living conditions or strengthening political parties. But recently, both private and public organizations have been getting the legal authority to work in these areas.

Since the king has overarching power, constitutional rights and freedoms are very limited in Morocco. It is not easy for the people to communicate with their leaders because too much power remains with the monarchy. And even though many changes have taken place, more is needed on the political front because the lives of Moroccans have not improved.

The electoral system also needs to be reformed because a functioning democracy has power vested in people, not a monarch. In the last election, more than 19 percent of the ballots were spoiled, and we believe this was a deliberate act of political protest by many Moroccan voters. Once Morocco establishes itself as a regional model, and once the lives of its citizens improve, the country will benefit tremendously.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Bardia Massoudkhan.

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