



# Rabat In A Hard Place

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These are trying times in Morocco. Over the past three months, the small North African kingdom has seen regime change roil two of its neighbors, Tunisia and Egypt, and a third—Libya—descend into civil war. The Moroccan street itself has seen its fair share of ferment; large-scale rallies calling for new social reforms and sweeping governmental changes have taken place throughout the country in recent weeks. In response, the country's monarch, Mohammed VI, outlined a series of far-reaching constitutional reforms in early March, even going so far as to propose a diminution of royal power in favor of the country's government and parliament. But, at least for now, the protesters do not appear to be entirely mollified.

Still, Morocco will not go the way of its neighbors. That is the message Moroccan officials are sending to their interlocutors in the West, and it was very much on the mind of the country's Foreign Minister, Taib Fassi Fihri, when I sat down with him recently in Washington. In town for meetings with key Western arbiters of his regime's stability, among them Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and World Bank president Robert Zoellick, Fassi Fihri was on a mission to tout the "Moroccan exception" to the current turmoil sweeping the Middle East and North Africa.

Morocco, he told me, is certainly not immune from the changes taking place in its neighborhood—but it is better positioned than most to weather them. That is because the King's recent proposed reforms weren't simply a knee-jerk reaction to the "Arab Spring" (like those in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, for example, have been). Rather, they are the acceleration of a series of societal adjustments that have been underway for some time.

There's considerable truth to that statement. Morocco already ranks among the most progressive countries in the Arab world, and for good reason. Its family code, known as the Moudawana, was revised in 2004 to give far greater rights to women (including equal status in the household, the power to initiate divorces and the right to inherit equally). Concurrently, religious reforms have helped pluralize the national interpretation of Islam, with a cadre of female preachers now empowered to weigh in on everything from marital problems to scientific inquiry. And since 2009, the government has presided over a vibrant public debate on the need for greater separation of powers and further economic reforms. That those were the same topics referenced by the King in his March speech is no coincidence; as Fassi Fihri put it, Morocco's reforms are so exceptional precisely because they are "not new."

But the West shouldn't just see the "Arab Spring" through the prism of governance, Fassi Fihri insisted. It's also about security, and considerable danger lurks behind the current democratic ferment in the region. As local regimes experience upheaval and turn inward, rogue actors such as al-Qaeda are finding themselves with far greater freedom of action. "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is now expanding geographically and in terms of nationality," he explained. It is inevitable that it "will try to intervene in Tunisia and Libya."

Morocco, Fassi Fihri believes, has the antidote to the problem. "The best way to fight al-Qaeda is with democracy," he told me. Implicit in that explanation is the view, widely held among Moroccans in and out of government, that the Moroccan "model" of governance and social empowerment can serve as an example for others in the region.

The one question Fassi Fihri could not answer, however, is that most on the minds of Mideast-watchers in Washington: whether the steps currently being undertaken by Morocco's government will be sufficient to mollify its restive masses. After all, the kingdom now finds itself in a curious quandary; having already undertaken the types of reforms only dreamt about elsewhere in the region, it has comparatively little left to give. Put another way, Rabat could well become a victim of its own progressivism.

Fassi Fihri and other Moroccan officials are confident it won't, and say their country will emerge from the current regional turmoil stronger than before. That, however, depends largely on whether the country's political opposition can take "yes" for an answer.

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