

Power without work: Morocco under Mohammed VI

Tuesday 16 October 2018, by [CEMBRERO Ignacio](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2018).

Recent years have seen a hardening of the regime of King Mohammed VI of Morocco. Increasingly protests in the country have been met with repression of dissidents, culminating in the arrest of more than 400 activist from the Northern Rif region. In this interview, Spanish journalist Ignacio Cembrero details the recent history of Morocco and the future of the nation.

The following interview with Spanish journalist Ignacio Cembrero, one of the only European journalists working in Morocco whose writing is held in high esteem by the Moroccan left, was conducted by Baudouin Loos for the Belgium newspaper [Le Soir](#). It is the fullest critical summary of Moroccan state politics this year, at least of those pieces intended for a Europe-based readership.

Cembrero's observation in [June last year](#) that '*le roi est nu derrière son bouclier*' ('the King is naked behind his shield') - that the King rather than Parliament rules, increasingly more via coercion than consent - captured both the regime's less embarrassed authoritarianism, and the Palace's increased exposure, with every institution - Parliament itself, the trade unions, the press, and indeed even commerce - ever-more blatantly "Royal".

Knowing Morocco as you do, how would you define the political functioning of the country? In principle, it presents the ingredients of democracy - elections with universal suffrage, an elected parliament, coalition governments, and so on - yet, as we know, these things are more complicated.

The Moroccan authorities have sometimes synthesised the political system with two words: "Executive Monarchy". Morocco has, indeed, the appearance of a democracy, with political parties, elections, parliaments; but, the reality is entirely different. Despite the approving of a new constitution in July 2011, the king has always held the essential power between his hands and, believe me, he exercises it.

How do you judge the Moroccan political class? Is it guarding the king? We hear that Mohammed VI [current Moroccan monarch] wanted to removed Prime Minister Benkirane, since he was a little too disobedient - is this your impression?

What can one say of a political class, of political parties, that renounce debating the defence budget, or the budget of the Royal Palace? What to say about deputies, when none of them are surprised at Mohammed VI passing half of his time in foreign holidays?

It has been a long time since that the parties, commencing with those of the left, and most especially the socialists, have renounced playing their role. The tragedy is that certain Moroccan politicians recognise this, in private, but don't move a finger to change it. It is a political class that which, with a few exceptions, has sold its soul - and to think that one finds the Moroccan political parties in the

conservative internationals, in the socialist internationals.

The king indeed removed Abdelilah Benkirane in March 2017, after having prevented him, via his confidants, from forming a government. He was, though, the winner of the October 2016 elections, which he won with more deputies than in 2011. One must not deceive oneself on this point - the ultimate aim of the Palace is removing Benkirane's party, the *Parti de la Justice et du Développement* (PJD) and, in general, political Islam [1]. For that, the Palace has encouraged the creation, or the resurrection, of artificial formations, starting with the *Parti Authenticité et Modernité* (PAM) some ten years ago. More recently, the powerful Minister of Agriculture, Aziz Akhannouch, has been parachuted into the position of head of the National Assembly of Independents, in order to breathe new life into it. For the moment, these attempts at creating alternatives to political Islam have not been effective, really.

An original Islamist movement of Morocco's own making survives, and has even known some success, despite remaining outside of the corridors of power, which it radically contests - what do you think of the *Justice et Bienfaisance* party?

Justice et Bienfaisance is an original, Moroccan version of political Islam. Sufi-inspired, it is non-violent, and in certain respects is more open and more tolerant than the PJD, who are close to the Muslim Brotherhood [2]. It constitutes the true opposition in Morocco, along with - though these are secondary - some miniscule left formations, though these are secondary. It is, without any doubt, the movement with the biggest capacity for mobilising on the street as it has shown on many occasions. Would it be the same at the ballot box? No one knows since it is not able to appear in elections - refusing to recognise the king as the Commander of the Faithful, which is to say the spiritual leader of Moroccan Muslims, it has never been legalised. It sometimes enjoys, however, a degree of tolerance from the state.

Who is Mohammed VI? He doesn't seem to much appreciate his own office.

In sum: the king likes power, but not the work that it implies. When I say 'work' I'm thinking not only of studying briefs in depth, presiding over Councils of Ministers, but another side, too, of protocols, formalism, and the solemnity that is the task assumed by a Head of State. This phenomenon was accentuated after 2011, and since, he has been more and more absent.

He travels to Gabon, to Hong Kong, but above all to France, between Paris and the family château, in Betz, in l'Oise. Over the course of the first four months of this year, he hasn't passed more than twenty days in Morocco. It's a unique case, across the world - a Head of State who concentrates all powers in his hands, but who passes half of his time abroad.

These last months, a popular movement boycotting certain commercial brands has developed in Morocco, especially brands belonging to millionaires close to the throne - what are your thoughts?

It's a phenomenon without precedent, not only in Morocco, but across the world.

Recent economic history is marked with boycotts against commercial brands, denouncing the exploitation of their workers, the pollutions they've caused, *et cetera*. But in Morocco, three major brands have been targeted, in order to protest against the cost of living. This has never been seen! None of the enterprises linked to the royal family have been targeted by the boycott, but amongst it's victims, so to speak, are the Afriquia service stations, and so it's proprietor, the same Agriculture Minister, Akhannouch, who is reputedly close to Mohammed VI.

The phenomenon began at the end of April on social media and, three months after, we still don't know who triggered it. I have seen the notes of European secret services, racking their brains to know who inspired the boycott, demanding of their "honourable correspondents" in Morocco to find those responsible. In vain!

I don't know whether it will, sooner or later, find political expression. I do know though that this boycotting in Morocco has been largely under-appreciated by the European press, and that it will be studied, some years later, as a textbook lesson on how to besmirch, how to damage - more-or-less seriously - a firm and its brand.

Over two years, we have also seen *mouvements de contestation* in the northern provinces, which have been met with serious repression - could the regime find itself shaken, do you think?

The crisis of the Rif has been, even more than 'Arab Spring' in 2011, the most serious of the reign of Mohammed VI. At the end of the spring of 2017, it was snuffed out with repression, with hundreds of arrests. More than 400 Rifian activists are now languishing in the Kingdom's prisons, and the four leaders of the peaceful rebellion were condemned to more than 20 years in prison. Even if, today, they lack a leadership, the Rifians will go out to the streets again, as soon as the security pressure drops, to demonstrate, to demand - above all - the liberation of prisoners.

But, the Rif is only one of the hothouses of this contestation. From Jerada to Zagora, peripheral Morocco - that is, not the '*Maroc Utile*', as the French coloniser called it - is also roiling, until the state uses the baton. [3]

More generally, if we have not returned to the Years of Lead (1960-1980), then we have possibly returned to a position where human rights are being violated in a systematic manner - is this also your impression

Tout à fait - yes, entirely correct.

From end of the reign of Hassan II in 1999, or, if you like, the beginning of the reign of Mohammed VI, Morocco was not a democracy, but it was more tolerant. The regime has hardened over the course of the last decade, without prompting the least criticism from its European partners.

In August 2017, the arrest of two opponents of the Venezuelan regime of Nicolas Maduro brought the condemnation of the international community, from the European Union first. Last June, 53 Rifian rebels were condemned to lengthy prison sentences: no one budged in Europe, any more than they budged when the baton came down on the Western Sahara, which continues now.

For a long time, the EU and its member states have had a 'two weights, two measures' in regards human rights. A prisoner in Cuba or Venezuela is worth more than an Islamist, a Rifian, a Sahraoui, or a homosexual convict in North Africa.

And what is the state of the press in Morocco? The *mauvaises langues*, the rumours, say that journalists who don't entirely respect the king's *lignes rouges* risk the worst; others say that a free press doesn't exist in Morocco.

The press is a little like human rights in Morocco. There had been a window - a period of tolerance had opened - but, little by little, it's been closed. There's not so much to read today in Morocco, and even amongst the medias which do attempt to inform people, subjects remain taboo. Did you see, for example, a single media outlet analyse the absence of the king in any depth? No, not since Ali Anouzla did it on *Lakome*, his online journal, in the spring of 2013. We know how that ended: under

various pretexts, he was thrown in prison, with the Sword of Damocles of his trial being reactivated always hanging over his head. And television in Morocco - there are only public broadcasters - is hardly worth the effort of talking about.

In 1975 Hassan II had a flash of genius, in brandishing the 'Moroccanness' of the Western Sahara, and he achieved success for the 'national' cause - how is the situation, 43 years later?

"I have settled the question of the Sahara, which has poisoned us for the twenty five years", declared Mohammed VI to *Le Figaro*, at the beginning of his regime. Near twenty five years later, the 'question' is far from being resolved. Even if no Western power has formally recognised the sovereignty of Morocco of over this former Spanish colony, none has put into question the control Morocco exercises there, since 1975.

Moroccan diplomacy is excessively anxious about the manoeuvres at both the UN's Security Council, and the African Union, in regards the Sahara - France, Spain and the other friendly countries are always there, watching that nothing disagreeable for Morocco occurs.

The only real setback suffered by Morocco over the last years were two rulings from the European Court of Justice, in December 2016 and February 2018, stipulating that the Sahara is not part of Morocco, and that the Association and also Fisheries Treaties concluded by the EU with Rabat are therefore not, therefore, applicable in the territory. But, the European Commission discovered a means by which European ships were able to continue to fish in Saharan water - making 91% of catches - all whilst respecting, according to them, the spirit of the Court's rulings.

It remains to be seen if this will be abided (*avalera la couleuvre*), since the French lawyers of the Polisario Front, and the Sahraoui independence movement, are not simply sitting, arms folded.

What do you think of the relations between Morocco and Spain, with France?

There are only two Western countries that are truly interested in Morocco, being France and Spain. After them come secondary countries, like Belgium or Holland, but their interests are not due to any historical ties, but rather because of the presence of strong Moroccan communities there, who continue to foster relations with their country of origin.

France, the principal former colonial power, considers itself as charged with a mission: the protection of Morocco and of its monarchy. Every president of the République have devoted themselves to this. This doesn't prevent crises, the last one having been between February 2015 and January 2015, following the vain attempt by the judicial police to bring Abdelatif Hammouchi, the most prominent *flic* in the Kingdom, before an investigating judge, who wanted to question him. The reprisals of Morocco consisted of cutting judicial and security cooperation with France - including even in the anti-terrorism struggle - for close to eleven months.

As for Spain, it's a country that considers itself, mistakenly, as having been taken hostage by Morocco. The fear is that Morocco will allow irregular migrants to leave from its coasts - it's done this more and more and, since 2016, every year records are beaten - or that it will cut security cooperation, meaning that successive governments, socialist or conservatives, have shown some care with their southern neighbour [4]. Indeed, Rabat plays these two cards - immigration and security co-operation - in order to obtain maximum diplomatic support and concessions from Spain and Europe.

Finally, could you describe your relationship with Morocco: you became a well-regarded

expert, but things went wrong, and you are no longer welcome.

You had quit *El País* in 2014, where you'd worked for thirty years, because of pressures deemed

In February 2014, the management of *El País* gave me 72 hours to drop my coverage of Morocco, and rejoin the team of big reporters on the Sunday edition. I'd worked at *El País* for thirty years, and for fifteen of those, I was focused on the Maghreb. My coverage of the region - excuse me for being a little vain - was characterised (*jalonner*) by scoops, and I enjoyed a good reputation, outside my own country's borders. I responded to management, in order to save appearances. The Moroccan government had just denounced me to the Spanish state prosecutor, for - get this - justifying terrorism, since I had analysed, on my blog with *El País*, the first video on Morocco from the Maghreb branch of al-Qaida.

I was close to changing post without complaining, when the Spanish prosecutor dismissed the Moroccan denunciation. That happened in June of 2014, since Spanish procedural law obliges the prosecutor pursue or dismiss a case within 6 months. The management of the journal refused my staying in Morocco, arguing that the Sunday team had urgent need of my services. I didn't accept this, and I left the journal.

I now know that what finally "spilled the vase" (*déborder le vase*) of Moroccan patience - the publication of two articles in 2013, one on the interminable holidays of the king, which the management of *El País* had only published on the website, and not in the paper - and the other attributing to the Palace the royal pardon issued to the Spanish paedophile Daniel Galván, who had been condemned to 30 years in jail, in Morocco.

The Moroccan authorities have, so far as I know, redoubled their efforts of convincing their Spanish interlocutors to insist Prisa, which publishes *El País*, to do without my services. That was in 2014. The story does not stop there. Morocco's lawyers have not let go over the years. I have had several misadventures on social media, in a restaurant, all reported to the Spanish police.

Finally, things calmed down. Since that time, the institutions close to the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs have closed their doors to me; they must think that my presence at their debates or conferences risks discomforting Moroccan participants. It is, all the same, paradoxical that at the end of last winter, I gave a lecture at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris, at the same - within a few days - that the Real Instituto Elcano, the most important Spanish think tank, organised a seminar on Morocco, without inviting me to attend.

Footnotes

[1] See Khalid Madhi's 2013 essay 'Islamism(s) and the Arab uprisings: between

commanding the faithful and mobilising the protestor' in the *Journal of North African Studies* for a brief history of the PJD and its antecedent organisations.

[2] *Jmā'at al-'adl wa-l-Iḥsān* are widely acknowledged to have been the chief organisers of the huge demonstration in support of the *Ḥirāk ar-Rif* (the Movement of the Rif) in [Rabat on June 11 last year](#) and, more generally, as the largest and most disciplined oppositional force in the country. *Al-'adl wa-l-Iḥsān* are not 'apolitical', as is often claimed. Rather, the group's long-time, defining criticism of the Monarchy's power - especially, the King's status as the 'Commander of the Faithful' - and their distance from electoral politics not so much limits the group's extra-parliamentary power as explains it.

Despite its size, it remains something of an unknown quantity, not least in terms of its class bases; its founder, Abdesslam Yassine (1928-1913) was himself a school inspector, and it appears the group's cadres have tended to come from the 'state proletariat' - urban, relatively educated, with fortunes tied to a (diminishing) public sector. The scarcity of information on the organisation flows both from its quasi-legality, and its members' self-discipline.

[3] 'Movement' ('*Hirāk*') has been the usual self-descriptor of the groupings that, despite their specific aggrivements - in the Rif, healthcare; in Jerada, unemployment; in Zagora, water - share several features, being: peri-urbanity; an organisational distance from the various left currents of Rabat and Casablanca; appeals for state intervention, often into processes of social reproduction (*Hirāk* Jerada's emphasis on work notwithstanding); and, finally, anti-graft politics. As Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi said recently, '[these protests express a social and political malaise in similar terms](#)'. Against the Movements, the state's basic strategy has been repression at the street level, combined with grotesque sentencing in the courts.

Journalists working for *Le Desk*, *Lakome*, *Middle East Eye*, not to mention numerous "citizen" news sites and social media groups, have risked a great deal reporting on and within these movements. The grievous three-year sentence given on June 29 this year to [Hamid El Mahdaoui](#), editor of [Bidal.info](#), was only the best-reported instance of the Moroccan state's jailing of oppositional journalists.

[4] For example, there were suggestions that 100 or-so sub-Saharan migrants' entering the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on 22 August was abetted, somehow, by Moroccan forces and, only days after, sub-Saharan migrants protested conditions in Tangier.

On the 6 September, the Spanish state's treatment of the migrants in Ceuta and Melilla [was recently rebuked](#), mildly, by a European Council representative; only yesterday, it was announced that they EU will provide \$275 million to "[to stem a rising flow of illegal migrants from the north African kingdom](#)".

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