

PROSPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ISLAM: MOROCCO

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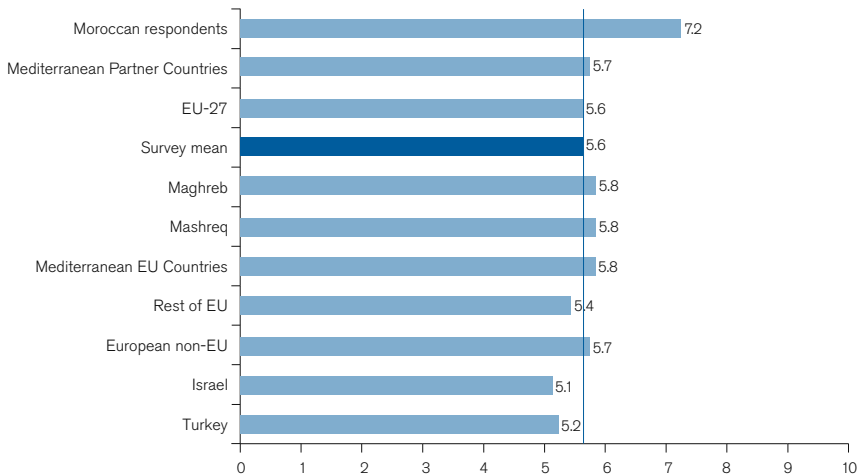
It is once again the story of the half-empty, half-full glass. Something is changing in Morocco and this is for a good reason. Yet referring to it as a genuine democracy would be either exaggerated or seen as a lack a clear understanding of what this concept actually means. Views emphasizing the Moroccan experience are not seldom. Neither are those claiming that anything that happens in this north African country is to be seen as a manoeuvre whose ultimate goal is to preserve the power in the very same hands as ever, namely in the hands of the King.

Economic growth has probably favoured the spread of a certain optimism about the country's prospects. Indeed, the transformations the social structures are experiencing have allowed for debates which were unthinkable a few years ago. Freedom of speech is starting to become a reality. The Monarchy seems to have finally understood it has to change its strategy. In this sense, the Tunisian and Egyptian lessons have given hands-on examples which have helped clarify the ideas of many. Yet the King's opening-up in this regard has had a rather symbolic than real value. Still, in spite of the timid reforms it has introduced, the new Constitution is a proof of the willingness to change. These are the factors which have spared Morocco from the instability other countries touched by the Arab Spring are facing. Pressure coming from the public opinion through some protest movements such as the one of the February 20 have been a positive element in that regard, not least because they have pushed for an awakening, which is already an achievement in itself.

The responses provided by Moroccan experts to the questions of the 3rd Euromed Survey -in particular with regard to the country's prospects for democracy, which they assess with an average value of 7.2 on a scale from 0 to 10- mirror the enthusiasm with which the country is living the recent reforms enacted by the Monarchy. Nonetheless, when comparing the assessment provided by Moroccan respondents with the survey mean and/or with the average assessments provided by each of the regional groups (see graph 1), it seems obvious that Moroccan opinions reflect an optimism bias.

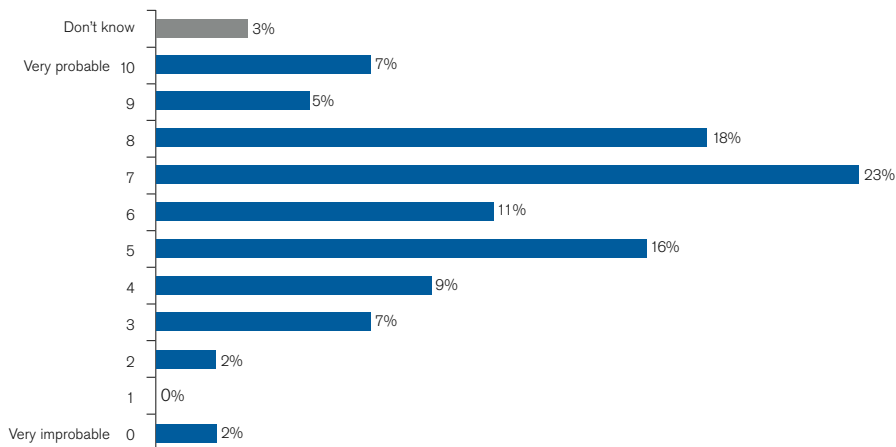
In any case, it is worth noting the perceived potential harmony, or at least not necessary contradiction between political Islam and democracy. The fact that the rise of political Islam is not seen by Moroccan respondents as an impediment, but rather as having the potential of going hands in hands with the establishment of a democratic structure -as it can be inferred from a comparison between graphs 1 and 2-, is a tangible proof of the evolution experienced by this ideology in the Moroccan context. The transformation underwent by the Islamic parties has, indeed, been a determining factor in their ceaseless effort to come into power.

Graph 1: Assessing the prospects of sustainable democracy in MOROCCO
(average on a scale of 0-10)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Graph 2: Role of political Islam in the future Mediterranean landscape Moroccan respondents (%)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

The celebration of free and “clean” elections for the first time in the country’s history have brought political Islam into power. However, the striking fact has been the low voter turnout, which points to a clear lack of confidence in the political game. In this sense, getting back the confidence in politics is Morocco’s main challenge today. Yet neither the government nor the opposition have much time left to persuade the citizenship about the reforms under way. To trust Morocco to be out of danger is the worst mistake the political class can possibly make. The first days of Benkiran’s government have been quite efficient. The “colourful”, straightforward and often demagogic language used by the Islamist leadership has proved to be fruitful. And the impact of the measures adopted right after his arrival into power has translated into an immediate reduction of the social tension. It seems clear that the Justice and Development Party (PJD) of Islamic beliefs, has quickly learned to do more politics and less religion, a choice which has brought it closer to the people, following the model of the “Turkish brothers” of Erdogan instead of that of the Muslim brotherhood, namely the historical one.

The head of the government has also understood that in Morocco it is only possible to rule with the blessing of the King. Actually, up until now, all the actions taken by Benkiran have served to reinforce the message, in case it was not clear enough in the text of the new Constitution, that the real power in this Maghrebian country still resides in the Monarchy. Finding the right balance between the King and the Government can help to successfully overcome this transitory phase ultimately leading to the establishment of a true democracy in the country. For the time being there are several hopeful elements. The only doubt that still remains is to determine whether the measures advanced by the Islamist party in power are aligned with genuine democratic beliefs or they are just a mere strategy to “convert” the society to a narrow-minded ideology.

Anyways, everything seems to indicate that Morocco finds itself in a crucial time of its history. It is a paradox that the success of the PJD is vital if a sliding down into a more radical Islamist faction is to be avoided. Meanwhile, the Association for Justice and Charity is waiting on standby. Until now it constitutes the only well-organised alternative to the Islamists, as well as the only movement determined not to accept the rules of the game established by the Monarchy. The other historical parties, such as al-Istiqlal (included in the government) or the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (opposition party) have lost most of their strength and they no longer get to persuade the citizenry.

So far the Monarchy has managed to handle very well the situation in a shrewd fashion. The tandem Palace-PJD has saved Morocco from dangerous scenarios. Creating the right atmosphere in order to be able to implement the mechanisms needed to evolve into a parliamentary monarchy could be the safest way to ensure stability. To achieve this, the tactics and strategies aimed exclusively at preserving the power need to be left aside in favour of a courageous brand new system that brings Morocco closer to its European neighbours, while allowing it to preserve its own identity. Democracy has its own rules and there are a number of valid examples of parliamentary monarchies which can serve as inspiration. To trust the citizens as mature enough to be able to take this step forward could be a good starting point towards establishing a sustainable democracy. The reforms undertaken this year in Morocco are a good first step in that direction. Yet the journey has only begun.