

Although locked in a long competition for regional primacy with its traditional rival, Algeria, Morocco has benefited from Algeria's large and well secured territory which buffers the country from jihadists in the region and in the Sahel, writes Garcia Munoz.

But economic and social unrest and growing conservative forces of Islam together with rising political militancy are threats to Morocco's long time stability. Contemporary religious political movements espouse a postmodern Islamist model to attract youth who, out of frustration due to unemployment that reaches more than 36 percent, are searching for an alternative to the current system

On February 20th, 2011 huge protests, somehow related to the Arab spring, but mainly due to disappointment of the people with their poor standard of living and welfare led to political adjustments in the constitution by the monarchy that ushered in an Islamic coalition cabinet. However, Morocco economic problems have increased in spite of the measures taken to liberalise the economy. Economic liberalisation in Morocco has undoubtedly been a political project ever since the first wave of structural changes in the 1980s privatised publicly owned enterprises, putting them in the hands of business elites with close ties to the government and reinforcing the state's "business networks that exist to this day.

Over the past few years, in an effort to narrow the budget deficit, the government has managed to pass some minor economic reforms, including reforming the pensions fund and ending fuel subsidies. It has also planned to privatize the education sector by reducing grants and public employment and to reform the pricing structure for utility services. But the government's efforts to introduce economic liberalisation measures have seen the largest social demonstrations that have mobilised popular opposition across the country over the past three years. These massive protests have prompted the government to halt economic and social reforms in order to deal with a situation which the country has known in recent history. The fear of authorities to fresh demonstrations against them made that on September 26, 2017 Morocco delayed the plan to introduce flexible currency reforms decided some months earlier, because any liberalization measures are seen from different points of view from the Prime Minister and other high placed officials. They feel that any new change on the economy might generate new waves of protests or amplify the population dissatisfaction with the regime and the monarchy.

The big issue for the government is that there is a great potential for social unrest throughout the country and authorities are afraid that the uprisings of 2011 in the rest of the Arab world from what Morocco has been shielded due to the reasons exposed above, might now happen in the country. Because since the bread riots that shook the kingdom in the 1980s there has not been a real improvement in the living standards of the country's marginalised rural areas where many people live without basic infrastructure or access to some elementary services.

Under these conditions the government has to practice a balancing act by bringing new changes in the social structure and in the economy that may offset the potential for unrest, thus halting a spiral of violence that the Monarch wants to elude at any cost as he said in the Crown Speech of July 29th. In his words he linked the ongoing protests to political corruption, blaming politicians and elected officials for a lack of transparency. Today, these apprehensions are compounded by growing tensions in the country's northern Rif region since last year.

In the last parliamentary elections in October 7th, 2016 held in order to deal with the unrest in the Rif that is also spreading to other regions, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) took again the first place and the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) (the formation supported by the crown and the regime) came second. The King could not avoid designating the General Secretary, Abdelilah Benkirane, as Prime Minister despite the fact that the PJD has been attracting the Salafists among its followers, even accepting a Salafist, Hamad Kabbaj, as number one in its electoral list in Marrakesh. This decision was unacceptable for the monarchy and the Minister of Interior invalidated his candidacy. The failure of Benkirane's government to deal with the wide protests in the Rif and elsewhere and the struggle for primacy between the PJD and the PAM has obstructed the formation of a third government by Benkirane by a coalition of leftists, liberal and Islamists. Having lost the confidence of the King, he has appointed last July the former General Secretary of the PJD, El-Othmani, to form government. To deal with the protests the new cabinet is increasingly turning to religion to discredit them, like it has done in the Rif where the Minister for Endowments and Islamic Affairs prepared a sermon that was delivered in the ministry controlled mosques accusing the protesters and their mentors of "fitna". This is a concept that means that protesters are acting against the righteous authorities and therefore considered as terrorists.

Morocco is a country with a bloated public sector and an economy heavily reliant on imports that requires urgent structural reforms and austerity measures, largely pushed by the IMF, to remedy for its budget deficit and in order to improve the standards of living of its citizens. However, the government's current apprehensions about implementing steep economic liberalisation come from the lack of support from the King and its advisors that fear the spread

of the ongoing unrest and social protests that could shake the foundations of the regime and bring political Islamism to power.

The real problem is the dichotomy of Moroccan politics that consider that only political actors and elected officials are traditionally held accountable to public opinion, but they exert the least authority when it comes to governing and decision making. The powers that are definitely in control – the monarchy and its broad circle of advisers, administrators and officials - remain above accountability and questioning.

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