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Morocco: Endangered 'Model'?

How should the United States relate to a solid ally whose human rights record is better than the norm in its region and better than its own record of 20 years ago - but is now heading in the wrong direction?

The United States has long held Morocco, a pro-Western ally, as a model for other countries in North Africa and the Middle East because of its cooperation in the fight against terrorism and simultaneous political liberalization. This image has helped Morocco strengthen its ties with the European Union too. Morocco is "on the front lines in the global war against terrorism," the State Department [wrote](#) in 2007, and "one of our most reliable and closest allies in the region. The country is a liberalizing, democratizing, and moderate Middle East nation undertaking broad political, social, and economic reforms." That year, Morocco won a five-year, \$700 million U.S.-government-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation grant.

In the mid-1990s, toward the end of his 38-year rule, the late King Hassan II eased repression, freeing political prisoners and ending the practice of "disappearing" opponents. After Hassan II's death in 1999, his son and successor, Mohammed VI, continued to liberalize politically, allowing exiles to return and affording critics a wider space to sound off in the media and on the streets. The young monarch also undertook two bold measures. He reformed the family code to give women more rights and established a truth commission - the region's first - to probe and acknowledge past abuses and compensate victims.

Recent Reversal

More recently, though, Morocco's advances have been eroded or reversed, mainly because they have not been institutionalized: working mechanisms are not in place to hold accountable the officials who flout them. The country's compliant judiciary, the institution that has lagged the most in the reform process, rarely investigates complaints of official abuses but reliably convicts dissidents in unfair proceedings. After all, if those in power were to allow courts to deliver justice independently, they would surrender a pillar of their repressive apparatus.

The effort to stem terrorism has contributed to the regression on rights. After coordinated suicide bombings in Casablanca on May 16, 2003, authorities rounded up and

tortured suspected militants, convicting hundreds in unfair trials. To its credit, the government did not extend the crackdown to mainstream Islamist movements or civil society.

Although Morocco has not had a major terrorist incident since the May 2003 attack, it faces a continuing and real threat from militant Islamist groups. Meeting this challenge is not easy but requires, among other things, effective police work, based on exploiting available technical means and collecting reliable human intelligence. That agenda is not advanced by allowing the police to fall back on indiscriminately arresting suspects, holding them in prolonged incommunicado detention, and coercing confessions that the courts then use to convict them.

Lately, however, the setback on rights seems to have less to do with combating terror than with reining in those who challenge the political status quo, centered on an unaccountable monarchy and the key ministries that answer directly to it.

For example, in July, a Rabat court convicted the heads of two parties, four other well-known political figures, and 29 others of complicity in a terror network, on the basis of confessions contested due to allegations of torture and falsified transcripts. The "Belliraj" case, which seems more about discrediting or weakening certain opposition parties than punishing terrorists, goes to appeal this month.

Western Sahara

In an ominous development, Morocco last month referred to a military court seven nonviolent activists who seek self-determination for the Western Sahara - a contested territory south of Morocco's internationally recognized border that Morocco claims and administers *de facto* - on charges of harming external state security.

"One is either a patriot, or a traitor," King Mohammed VI [declared](#) one week later in a speech marking the 34th anniversary of Morocco's "Green March" to take control of the former Spanish colony. "Is there a country which would tolerate a handful of lawless people exploiting democracy and human rights in order to conspire with the enemy against its sovereignty, unity and vital interests?" The "Moroccanness" of the Western Sahara, which Moroccan authorities have portrayed for decades as *the* national cause, remains a convenient pretext for repressing rights, on the grounds that Sahrawis who favor self-determination are Algerian-backed enemies of Morocco's "territorial integrity."

While Morocco's press may be among the freest in the Middle East and North Africa, it's also arguably the one whose freedom has shrunk the most during the past year. Since June, the courts have jailed one magazine editor for writing about the king's health and heavily fined three newspapers for "insulting" the Libyan leader, Muammar Qaddafi. Exercising powers found nowhere in the law, the interior minister destroyed issues of two magazines in August because they reported on a public opinion poll about the king and in September ordered the police to evict the staff and padlock the offices of a daily that ran a caricature of a royal cousin.

Clinton's Move

After meeting with King Mohammed VI on November 2, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the first top Obama official to visit Morocco, [saluted](#) the reforms that have enabled Moroccan women to "bring their considerable talents to strengthening democratic institutions, accelerating economic growth and broadening the work of civil society."

Let us hope that in private, Clinton conveyed to the king a concern that the overall human rights situation in Morocco is deteriorating - for women as for men who engage in social or political activities that displease those in power.

To remain silent about Morocco's backsliding because "it is better than its neighbors" would promote complacency about a situation that, once a cause for hope, is threatening to settle down as one more stalled transition. In a country that Washington commended for liberalizing politically while combating extremism, that augurs ill on both fronts.

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