

Morocco's King Slow to Deliver on Pro-Democracy Vows

By Aida ALAMI, *New York Times*, June 11, 2014

A few weeks shy of his 15th anniversary as [Morocco](#)'s ruler, King [Mohammed VI](#) was spotted on the streets of Tunisia in jeans and a T-shirt while on an official visit, living up to the [King of Cool](#) nickname given to him by the foreign news media.

Back in the kingdom, however, tensions have been rising. Pro-democracy activists and journalists have faced increasing repression, as the government tries to tame an opposition emboldened by the 2011 Arab revolutions.

One journalist, Ali Anouzla, is risking up to 20 years in jail on charges of promoting terrorism for reporting on a video that is thought to have been made by a militant group, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The video attacked the monarchy and called for jihad in Morocco.

Another journalist, Mustapha Hassnaoui, is serving a four-year sentence for what the government said were his connections with jihadists in Syria. Mr. Hassnaoui started a hunger strike in late May to protest his detention.

[Mouad Belrhout](#), a rapper who was the face of the pro democracy February 20 Movement in 2011, is on trial on what he calls trumped-up charges of illegally selling the state's soccer tickets. Many activists involved with the movement were recently sentenced from six months to one year in jail for participating in a union protest on April 6.

In 2011, when Moroccans took to the streets, the king responded swiftly to the growing dissent by promising a complete overhaul of past undemocratic practices, more freedom and respect for human rights.

He also allowed the creation of a new Constitution, a ploy that his father, King Hassan II, resorted to seven times when facing crises during his 38-year reign. Hassan II [died in 1999](#).

The departing United Nations high commissioner for human rights, [Navi Pillay](#), said that it was clear that Moroccan leaders had the political will to carry out promised reforms, and that the country had “made great strides towards the better promotion and protection of human rights.”

But she also called attention to the government’s inaction. “Many of the promising protections under the Constitution have yet to be translated into reality for the people of Morocco,” Ms. Pillay [told journalists](#) in Morocco at the end of a three-day visit last month and after a meeting with Mohammed VI. “There are high expectations about the positive impact of reforms, but these cannot be met until the laws are promulgated.”

Human rights activists said there had been much fanfare but little change.

“On human rights, Morocco is like a vast construction site, with frequent ribbon-cutting ceremonies to inaugurate grand projects,” said Eric Goldstein, deputy director of Human Rights Watch for the Middle East and North Africa. “Meanwhile, authorities continue to arrest and imprison protesters and dissidents on trumped-up charges and violently break up peaceful demonstrations, especially in Western Sahara.”

Mr. Goldstein added that Mr. Anouzla’s terrorism-related charges were clearly intended to intimidate others who openly challenge the country’s “red lines.”

But opposition has grown significantly since the February 20 Movement, reflecting Moroccans' increased willingness to challenge the government.

“A major part of the political class refused to discuss in public real issues concerning the ills of our society, namely the role of the monarchy, respect for human rights, the distribution of wealth and the separation of powers,” said Marouane Morabit, 28, an activist based in Casablanca and a staunch supporter of the February 20 Movement.

That is different now, Mr. Morabit said, even though speaking up had fatal consequences for his friend, Karim Lachkar, who died under mysterious circumstances in police custody on May 27 in the northern city of Al Hoceima.

“Karim was a leader,” he said. “The version given by the police is confused and contradictory and disrespectful of the family of the victim.”

Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, a professor of international studies at the Institute of Political and International Studies at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, who has researched Moroccan democracy movements, said, “The regime goes after opposition figures for common crimes, or terrorism in the case of Anouzla, to remove their political opponent status and to prevent them from becoming heroes.”

“Morocco is one of those regimes that are in a gray zone — not completely authoritarian nor democratic — where repression is done selectively and punctually,” Ms. Bennani-Chraïbi added. “As the movement was strong and the regime was uncertain, security forces were walking on eggshells because they knew that massive repression is what lights the fire and would amplify the movement.”

Still, the authorities have no fear of targeting individuals such as Mr. Anouzla, and Morocco's judicial system will not prove helpful to them, experts say.

"The state jails any activist if it wants to. Law matters little here," said [Reda Oulamine](#), a lawyer based in Casablanca and the president of Law and Justice, a group dedicated to establishing the rule of law in Morocco.

"There is still no independent judiciary despite the new Constitution, which was implemented to soothe the street," said Mr. Oulamine, adding that there had been "some progress with the creation of the brave Club of Judges," formed by hundreds of magistrates in 2011 to demand more independence for the judiciary.

On several occasions the justice minister, Mustapha Ramid, has [denied](#) allegations that the government had tortured detainees and filed trumped-up charges against dissidents. He says the state is not responsible for individual abuses of power.

Lawmakers talk about addressing the judicial system's shortcomings and expect to introduce legislation on human rights protections in the next few weeks.

"There is a will to reform the laws, and there has been a discussion for over a year; these things don't happen overnight," said Aatimad Zahidi, a member of Parliament. "There has already been a lot done, like to protect undocumented migrants through a recent campaign to legalize them."

Experts say the kingdo has astutely discredited the major sources of political opposition, effectively defusing the anger and frustration of most Moroccans. But that strategy has limits, many believe.

"The kingdom discredited the left, trade unions, civil society and now the Islamists," said Mr. Morabit, the activist. "It will soon face a direct confrontation with the people, and it will no longer have any safety valves."