

# The Winter of Morocco's Discontent: Will the Arab Spring Arrive?

By Vivienne Walt, *TIME*, 23 Jan, 2012

Could Morocco be next? For nearly a year, Moroccans have clashed with riot police in near-weekly protests, as they take to the streets to demand more political freedom and better economic opportunities. Yet even so, it had seemed that the country would avoid the kind of upheaval that has rocked Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, thanks largely to timely reforms of its monarch, King Mohammed VI, who moved quickly to try to placate unrest when it began in February 2011. Through months of turmoil in the Arab world, Morocco's 32 million people have voted in a new constitution, unseated the governing party and installed a new Islamist government.

But something is still missing. Having promised true democracy, the King may find himself increasingly the target of people's frustrations. It is a conundrum for Mohammed VI the reformer: he remains the unchallenged ruler-for-life, whose authority cannot be questioned under Moroccan law. Moroccans increasingly believe that to win far-reaching

democratic changes, an all-out confrontation with royal authority might be needed. "If the government and King don't react really fast, people will be asking for other things in the street," says Reda Oulamine, an attorney who heads the Association of Law and Justice, a pro-democracy organization in Casablanca. "As we've seen in the Arab Spring, things can move fast."

The clearest sign yet that Morocco's stability might be at risk came last Wednesday, when five university graduates set themselves on fire in the capital Rabat, as part of nationwide protests against unemployment. Three of the men were hospitalized with severe burns. Though the protests by jobless graduates began months ago, the images on YouTube of young men aflame still shocked many people, in part because it echoed the start of the Arab Spring in December, 2010 with the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor. His death brought hundreds of thousands of Tunisians into the streets, within weeks driving President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power after 23 years, and helping to inspire the Egyptian and Libyan revolutions.

Within days of Ben Ali's downfall last January, the King of Morocco scrambled to stave off a similar explosion in his country, ordering police to crack down hard on protesters but also promising Moroccans serious reforms. Last June, he signed a new constitution, ensuring freedom of speech and expanding the parliament's powers, including giving the majority political party the right to name the Prime Minister, who until then had been a royal appointee.

In some ways, the King's actions have been a success: Moroccans overwhelmingly approved the new constitution in a July referendum, and ousted the ruling party in November elections, bringing in the Islamist Justice and Development Party — hardly an ally of royalty.

Yet the newly elected politicians have found themselves hemmed in by the entrenched interests of the King and his advisors, as they try to implement meaningful changes. Having won their election on an anti-poverty campaign, the new government wants to raise taxes on the rich, and cut fuel subsidies to businesses, especially the powerful state-run phosphate industry, which is controlled by close associates to the King. "The new Islamist-led government and the monarchy are on a collision course," Riccardo Fabiani, North Africa analyst for the Eurasia Group, wrote in a briefing note on Monday. Without serious reforms, he says, people's frustrations will boil over in "a wave of unrest across the country."

Until now, the opposition, led by the youth organization called "February 20," has remained too divided to confront the monarch. But some believe that could change. "Contrary to what many people abroad have thought, Morocco is no exception from the Arab world," Oulamine says. "There is a lack of prospects and a lack of hope."

The issues in Morocco are similar to those that sparked the region's revolts: High unemployment and a wide gulf between rich and poor. Perhaps not surprisingly, the King opposes the new government's economic plans, and has the power to block them under Moroccan law. The new Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, who leads of the majority Justice and Development party and is the first with the title not to be appointed by the king, is nevertheless dependent on the monarch to ratify laws that the parliament passes. Royal approval is proving to be difficult. Benkirane "remains bound hand and foot to the royal palace," says Ahmed Benchemsi, the former publisher of Morocco's popular news magazine *TelQuel*, who is a visiting scholar at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. "The King can still block any law he dislikes," he wrote in an article in this month's *Journal of Democracy*, which is published by Johns Hopkins University. "He alone convenes, presides over, and sets the agenda for the Council of Ministers — a body whose approval is needed before Parliament can even consider a bill."

Press freedoms remain limited too, despite the new constitution. One of Morocco's best-known newspaper columnists, Rachid Nini, was sentenced to a year in jail last July for offending public officials and disparaging the courts; he has since become a cause celebre for activists. Much like Egyptians and Tunisians, Moroccans have long accepted the limits to their freedom, perhaps out of genuine affection for their King, and also because their economy was growing. That patience is now fraying.

The recession has hit Morocco hard, especially since the country depends heavily on its trade with the European Union; about 70% of Morocco's exports head to Europe, and the economy has long relied on remittances from 3 million Moroccans working in Europe. Those remittances dropped about 12.5% during the first year after the 2008 recession hit, according to the World Bank, as Moroccans have lost their jobs. There are also few jobs for those Moroccans who return home. Unemployment stands at about 10% and is about double that rate for youth, according to the World Bank.

Even with a major jobs plan, Morocco could take years to overcome problems like poor-quality schools, few of which teach English or French. Oulamine says the education system leaves Moroccans ill-prepared for the job market. "If you join any modern company or administration and you only speak Arabic, they will say, 'would you like to wash the dishes or sweep the floor?'" he says. "Ninety-nine percent of schools are worthless factories producing unemployed people." Now, those unemployed people are taking to the streets.