

Moroccans protest after monarchy, Muslim party fail to deliver on reform

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

Morocco, held up as a model for reform in the wake of the Arab Spring, is slipping back into autocracy. Though a new constitution was passed in 2011, ongoing economic marginalization, a lack of transparency, and abuses by security forces have driven citizens to the streets for the first time in five years.

Observers and activists say that the government has responded by stifling speech and press freedoms and using the long reach of its security services to prevent a new protest movement from gaining steam.

They have concluded that it's not enough to change the laws without reforming the institutions that enact those laws—institutions that remain unaccountable and enforce the monarch's will.

“Morocco is frequently held up as a success,” said Sarah Yerkes, a Morocco scholar who is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. “A new constitution is huge, but it is a constitution on paper. The reforms are only as good as they are implemented.”

When the Arab Spring protests shook Morocco in 2011, instead of using force to crack down on dissent, as in Syria or Bahrain, or allowing a toppling of the government as in Egypt, the country's monarchy chose a third way: implementing immediate democratic and constitutional reforms.

King Mohammed VI implemented a liberal constitution, empowering the parliament and prime minister and surrendering a handful of his own powers, including the ability to dissolve the parliament.

The constitution was overwhelmingly approved, with reportedly 98 percent of voters in favor, and elections were held later that year, allowing the Justice and Development Party, or PJD, who are Islamists, to sweep into government.

Five years later, unemployment still stands around 10 percent, while youth unemployment reaches as high as 39 percent in urban areas.

Freedom of speech has been stifled. The Moroccan state prohibits the use of encrypted communications such as Skype, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp voice calls on the grounds of protecting telecommunications companies from unfair competition.

Despite passing a much-hyped new press law removing prison terms for journalists who insult the monarchy or religion, an unchanged article in the country's penal code still sentences citizens to five-year prison terms for "shaking the loyalty that citizens owe to the state and the institutions of the Moroccan people."

The Moroccan state has made a series of high-profile arrests of journalists and human rights activists. In June, the judiciary began a trial of seven leading human rights activists for training citizen journalists through a mobile phone app.

Protests erupted in October after fish wholesaler Mouhcine Fikri was crushed to death in a truck during an attempt to retrieve over \$11,000 worth of swordfish confiscated by authorities.

Thousands hit the streets in Fikri's hometown and protests spread to the capital Rabat, with protesters focusing their ire at the *makhzen*—the collection of security apparatuses, government agencies, and elites acting on behalf of the monarchy.

"There is a sense that authorities have yet to deliver on accountability for these abuses," said Sirine Rached, North Africa researcher at Amnesty International. "Despite all the trumpeting and pomp around reforms since 2011, provisions on free expression have not been improved."

Observers and advocates said extensive patronage networks and corruption maintain support for the monarchy while limiting economic opportunities for citizens.

"The nature of power has not been transformed; the monarchy retains tremendous power, more so than before the uprising," said Abdeslam Maghraoui, Morocco expert and professor of political science at Duke University. "You need to reform the political power, not just the constitution."

By allowing the PJD to form the government and win successive elections, the Moroccan regime has ensured that the Islamists—the largest organized political

group in the country—would continue to be partners with the state and unwilling to challenge the status quo.

The Moroccan regime has even enlisted the support of Salafists, clerics, and other Muslim leaders, allowing them a free space to preach, as long as they advocate continued support for the monarch and denounce those looking to change the balance of power in the country. This has left activists and protesters without an organization or body to push the regime for institutional reform.

Yet observers say this is not a long-term formula for stability.

“You can only keep people quiet if you deliver on some of the things you promised to deliver on,” Yerkes said. “In the long run, you end up with an angry public that feels dissatisfied, that feels like Tunisians in 2011—like they have nothing to lose.”

—[*The Christian Science Monitor*](#)