

Morocco Is on the Path to Change



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The Arab monarchies have survived the turmoil in the Middle East for several reasons. First, the monarchic institution remains deeply linked to national identity in many of these countries because of anticolonial struggle and the historical importance of the institution itself. Second, monarchies have traditionally arbitrated conflicts between different groups and classes, acting as benevolent caretakers of society. They have also allowed other institutions, like parliaments, to represent the people, thus staying above the political fray.

These factors have earned Arab monarchs a respite from the wave that swept away regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and possibly Yemen, but the respite will not last forever.

In the Gulf, enormous oil revenue has permitted monarchies to initiate new welfare and development programs to deflect public pressure. Geopolitics matter too: it has become clear that Saudi Arabia will not permit the crisis in Bahrain to truly threaten the existence of its monarchy. Likewise, at the international level, the United States and the European Union have little desire to encourage any more instability in this economically vital area.

The issue of monarchical survival has become inextricably entangled with the dynamics of Sunni-Shiite sectarian tension, which pits Iran against the Arab Gulf kingdoms. This discourse has grown hegemonic: not just the monarchies but also oppositionists have internalized these fears, blunting the demand for political reform.

Morocco and Jordan — the two oil-poor monarchies — are trying to satisfy their citizens by liberalizing instead of democratizing. They have turned to controlled political openings cloaked in the language of freedom but intended to perpetuate the status quo. Limited constitutional reforms, tolerance of more opposition and new parliamentary elections are welcome steps, but such measures do not devolve power away from the palace.

And such policies cannot indefinitely quiet the restive middle classes, who are no longer satisfied with constrained pluralism and demand genuine participation. What they desire is not revolution

but reformation toward constitutional monarchy, a new system of governance that embodies the spirit of democracy while retaining the historical role of monarchism in these societies. The path to change may be uneven, and sometimes even chaotic, but it has begun.

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