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OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

MOROCCO / The Impact of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution

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Date of publication: 19 February 2011

Observatorio Electoral

Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.election-watch.org

www.opemam.org

ISSN: being processed

www.observatorioelectoral.es

Against the backdrop of events in Tunisia and Egypt, many observers herald the possibility of a spillover effect, leading other Arab countries by way of revolutions towards an Arab Democratic Spring. Such predictions are fed by popular rallies in support of the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples that are taking place on the streets of many capitals and cities across the Arab world.

However, it is very difficult to substantiate this effect, for two principal reasons. The first is that although these countries do share many socio-political features, each has its own characteristics resulting in its own political history, while each regime has its own degree of legitimacy, each political scene its own degree of openness, each opposition its own relative strength, the respect of social and political rights in each is different, as is each state's economic situation, the average level of education of each population, the rates of human development and quality of life of each state's citizens, their limits of resistance, etc. The second reason, meanwhile, is related to the degree of success the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have had in terms of achieving their goals. If they do achieve their goals they will become models to follow. But it is important to bear in mind that in the case of Tunisia, although the revolution has beheaded the regime, it still has not dismantled it.

In the case of Morocco, the entire population is closely following developments, making no secret of their hope and often enthusiasm, to see both revolutions succeed, putting Morocco's neighbours onto the path of a real democratic transition. However, unlike other Arab countries, the people have not ventured out onto the streets to express themselves, nor do they seem to be preparing themselves to do so, except in a few timid concentrations outside the Egyptian embassy in Rabat and elsewhere in the country, organised by civil society organisations such as ATTAC or the AMDH. These concentrations have been reduced in size and have limited themselves to expressing their unconditional support for the legitimate demands of Tunisian and Egyptian democrats, without translating these demands into national politics. Among these actors, the line that Morocco is "exceptional" is predominant, which is, in fact, a way of legitimising the current regime.

Furthermore, the regime has chosen to maintain absolute silence, a stance only broken at the fall of Tunisian President Ben Ali, when the Foreign Affairs Ministry issued an official statement wishing, without going into details, a good future for the people of Tunisia. Simultaneously, the government took several preventive measures like price controls on basic food items, and made agreements to resolve its conflicts with a few trade unions, clearly so as to rule out any economic motive agitating the population.

As far as the political parties go, there have been no major public reactions and only a few have resonated in the news media. Among these is that of Nabil Benabdallah, the new secretary general of the PPS, one of the parties that makes up the coalition government, who declared that Mohammed VI is already carrying out the Jasmine Revolution in Morocco peacefully; and that of Mustafa Jalfi, head of the strategic observation unit of the Unification and Reform Movement (MUR) considered to be the ideological unit of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), who invited Tunisians to take into consideration the pluralistic political reality of Morocco as a model for its democratic transition.

That said however, in the street and in the press there are two opposing views concerning the possible domino effect that might involve the country. The first admits the possibility of a contagious effect, and is based on the similarities that exist, according to this line of thinking, between the Moroccan, Tunisian and Egyptian regimes. Thus, the Moroccan regime is considered to be nothing more

than an executive monarchy that monopolises power on the basis of a constitution that gives it prerogatives and sacrosanctity. A monarchy that monopolises control of the political, religious and even economic arenas, which has created a dedicated political party (the PAM) to control the political landscape, discrediting the electoral process and the institutions which, in theory, should represent the people democratically. A monarchy that allows the violations of citizens' political, social and economic rights, that does not react in the face of corruption of the justice system, or against those closest to it, both civilians and military, who live off corruption and misappropriation of the people's wealth (a fact that has been corroborated by the latest revelations from Wikileaks) According to this position, Morocco suffers from the same diseases behind the outrage that led Tunisians and Egyptians onto the path of revolution.

The second and opposing view rejects any possibility of contamination, based on the differences between the Moroccan and other Arab regimes. In this regard, they emphasise the political, social and economic reforms undertaken by the regime, especially with regard to political pluralism (partial integration of the Islamist movement and the extreme left into politics), cultural diversity (greater recognition of the Amazigh language and culture, creation of the IRCAM) human rights (establishment of a truth commission to investigate the violations that occurred during the "lead" years - an unprecedented experience in the Arab world), the modernisation of women's status (the new Family Code), economic stability (plans for sectoral development such as the Green Plan for agriculture or the Blue Plan for tourism), freedom of the press, the stability and safety of citizens and so forth. According to this position, Morocco in the late eighties went through the same situation that the countries undergoing revolutions are now going through, and has gotten through it thanks to the steps towards a greater political opening that were taken during the nineties.

Nevertheless, instead of fixating on whether the glass is half empty or half full, two important elements need highlighting. On the one hand, while the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have turned their finger accusingly at the head of those regimes, in the Moroccan case, it is at the government and not at the figure of the king, who is the head of state, that they would point. The Monarchy has long known how to look after its public image, especially with regard to the masses, and how to divert the people's discontent onto the government. Endless visits to various cities and towns across the kingdom, as if he was constantly involved in some electoral campaign, help to consolidate an image of proximity that the king's cabinet ministers sorely lack.

Actions such as the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) launched in 2005, which mobilised a large part of civil society towards the main areas of poverty, have thrilled the most poverty-stricken masses, which are often the cannon fodder of uprisings. In addition, the king usually takes the lead in periodic operations against corruption among senior civil service officials, as in the recent case of Al Hoceima, which promote his image of fairness and honour. This positive image is consolidated with gestures like pardoning journalists and bloggers who have been repeatedly convicted for libelling and slandering his person.

The upshot is that the anger of the helpless, poor and marginalised masses, the unemployed youths or censored journalists in most cases focuses on members of the Government, and particularly on the figure of the prime minister. Only occasionally does it affect the king's entourage, in the cases of accusations against close friends and key elements of his regime. This, at least,

is what stands out from the opinions circulating in public among the population groups as well as on Internet forums.

This does not mean that there is no criticism of the king, but such criticism, despite its importance, fails to justify a revolution that would seek his overthrow. The most repeated calls focus on a thorough reform of the constitution, in the sense of reducing the privileges of the king on behalf of the Parliament and Government, granting more social rights and greater recognition of personal rights.

Moreover, the system often manages to deactivate or avoid the radicalisation of certain political or social protests that spring up from time to time at local level (riots in Sefrou, Sidi Ifni and Figuig, groups of young unemployed graduates) through lop-sided negotiation and strategic concessions of a personal nature. Prominent examples of this practice are the victory in the 2009 municipal elections of the independent list made up of the same young people that led the revolt in Sidi Ifni, who had been arrested and prosecuted one year before; or the regulation of an employment situation, by admitting the group of unemployed graduates who tried to set fire to themselves in early June, into the public service.

In conclusion, it appears that Moroccan society sees no need to get involved in a protest action of revolutionary scope to change a regime that while not democratic, is not as closed and repressive as those of Tunisia and Egypt. Without the generalised ill feeling that comes to those living under a dictatorship, Morocco's population is not motivated to launch some miscalculated action that could lead to an uncertain future. These fears only increase if you take into account the added risks that could result from political destabilisation in a country like Morocco, which considers its territorial integrity threatened by separatist claims in the Sahara and the Rif.

The Islamic association Al Adl Wal Ihsane is the only force that could be expected to make a move in this direction, especially if the scenario in neighbouring countries becomes similar to what its spiritual leader Abdessalam Yassine has called, in his ideological literature, *qawma arima* or an "uprising of the masses" against the regime. But it has still not made a pronouncement. Perhaps because it does not feel qualified to lead such an uprising, or perhaps out of the belief that the Moroccan fruit is not yet "ripe" enough.