Morocco at a Critical Crossroads

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Abstract: This paper examines some of the conflicts and contradictions that plague Moroccan society and may jeopardize its present and future stability. Some of these conflicts are old; others are recent. Some are external and are the legacy of colonialism while others are inherent and endogamous. For simplicity’s sake I have tried to classify them in antithetical pairs. I have chosen to deal with secularism vs. theocracy, Imazighen vs. Arabs, Imazighen vs. the Makhzen, the rich vs. the poor. I am aware that ethnicity, religion, politics, the economy, and gender often overlap and are largely responsible for the existing tensions and conflicts. The polarization of society along ethnic, linguistic and religious divide needs to be examined within the geopolitics of the world today. The tug of war between conservatives and liberals, modernists and traditionalists will likely continue unless the real causes of tension are addressed. Political rights, religious freedom, gender and ethnic discriminations are issues that should be on top of the government agenda. In my humble opinion, the root of all evil is poverty. As long as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, as long as the riches of the country are not equally distributed and if the distinction between ‘the useful’ and ‘non-useful’ regions is not abolished, social upheaval and popular uprising will go crescendo. To fight social injustice, nepotism, political corruption requires political will. And to invest in education, health and infrastructure, and job yielding activities is the antidote to ignorance, bigotry and all forms of extremism.

Key words: Ethnicity, Islam, colonialism, Imazighen, Fundamentalism, Political reform, Makhzen.

1. Introduction

For a long time Morocco had enjoyed a period of peace and serenity, envied by friends and enemies alike. Despite economic crises, social upheavals and occasional popular discontent, the country managed to weather the storm and avoid the state of anarchy which befell most Arab countries following the Arab spring.

It is also true that post-independent Morocco’s history had been marred by political turmoil and popular unrest. The 60s, aptly called ‘years of lead’, saw a crackdown on leftist and nationalist parties, dissolution of the parliament, imprisonment of progressive party leaders and censorship of avant-garde papers.

In 1965 students’ uprising to demand free access to higher education was brutally crushed by the infamous Oufkir, minister of interior. In 1971 Ababou staged a coup which backfired and his acolytes were either killed or sent to the sinister Tazmamart prison. The following year the same Oufkir, now general and king’s closest friend masterminded another coup which equally failed. The general took his life.

In the 80s years of severe drought coupled with drastic and unpopular economic measures dictated by IMF led to immigration of rural population to large cities in search of better job opportunities. The influx resulted in mushrooming of shantytowns and precariousness of living conditions. As a result endemic pauperization of large segments of the population gave rise to cultural, ethnic, and economic challenges which Morocco has had to tackle.

This paper will examine some of the conflicts and contradictions that plague Moroccan society and may jeopardize its stability. Some of these conflicts are old; others are recent. Some are external and are the legacy of colonialism while others are inherent and endogamous. For simplicity’s sake I have tried to classify them in antithetical pairs. I have chosen to deal with secularism vs. Theocracy, Imazighen vs. Arabs, Imazighen vs. the Makhzen, the rich vs. The poor. I am aware that ethnicity, religion, politics, the economy, and gender often overlap and are largely responsible for the existing tensions and conflicts.

2. The Imazighen Issue

To gauge the full scope of the “Imazighen problem,” a short historical digression may prove useful. The Imazighen or free people lived some 4000 years ago on Tamazgha - a large territory which encompassed North Africa, Egypt, Mali, Niger, and the Canary Islands. They spoke Amazigh and worshipped different deities. When the Arabs conquered Morocco in the 7th century, it took them a long time to pacify the autochthonous inhabitants. The new religion largely supplemented the indigenous one and partly ensured social cohesion. In fact the expansion of the country beyond its border had been the work of Berber dynasties including Almoravid and Almohad.
Berbers were not only intrepid fighters but also devout Moslems. For centuries Arabs and Imazighen lived side by side and the cohabitation was peaceful and smooth. That was the case until the French colonized the country in 1912. General Lyautey, a staunch supporter of the Berbers, wrote, ‘J’ai toujours supporté l’élément berbère plutôt que l’élément arabe dégénéré.’

To achieve their colonial project the French employed a “divide in order to rule” policy, by playing one ethnic group against the other. What could serve their intention better than the ‘Berber Dahir’? The colonial power wanted to implement a judiciary system, especially tailored for the Berbers on the basis that their customary laws were different from the Arabs.

The policy of containment of Berbers (confining their territorial space), while suppressing the Islamic judicial system, drove a wedge between the traditional Arab elites and the Berber peasants. In Morocco (where the same French colonial policy as that conducted in Algeria led indirectly to the current national crisis between Arabs and Berbers), the French provided segregated schools for the Berbers, while they tried to rally Berber tribes to the tricolor behind Al-Glawi, a powerful Caïd (tribal leader) whose base was Marrakech.

The nationalist movement, however, spearheaded by emblematic and charismatic leaders such as Hassan Ouazzani, Ahmed Balafrej, Mohamed Lyazadi and Mekki Naçiri were the first to recognize the hegemonic and messianic nature of the Berber Dahir and militated against its implementation. Popular rallies were organized across the country and as a result the project was abrogated in 1934. While relation between Arabs and Imazighen were generally amicable, they were strained with the Makhzen – a loose term that refers to the Palace, ministry of interior and police and security apparatus. Such was the case after Morocco got its independence.

After independence, the three main actors on the political scene were the King, the Istiqlal, and the Berber movement. [2] The Berber resented Istiqlal, the Moroccan party that was a beacon of Arab-Islamic nationalism in Morocco. This resentment, along with Berber resistance against Morocco’s centralized administration, or Makhzen, resulted in a series of revolts in the late 1950’s in the Rif region, which were violently crushed by Crown Prince Hassan and the army.

This painful episode in Morocco’s contemporary history will have everlasting effects on the relation between the central government and the Rif because ‘the Rif, which has a unique history of republicanism, migration, revolt, and poverty, could potentially display more confrontational politics.’

One noteworthy remark to take into consideration is the specificity of Moroccan Imazighen compared to, say, the Algerian Berbers of Kabylie who had been massacred by French in retaliatory measures.

The new Algerian government, ruled by the military elite, forbade the use of the Berber language in the media, schools, and government offices and banned Berber names for children. Berber leaders were arrested and killed.

In Morocco when Imazighen strike or organize marches it is often to demand that the state recognize their specific ethnic identity. The country’s Berber movement has historically been more focused on cultural and linguistic issues, like making official recognition of Tamazight their key demand.

The situation of Berbers who inhabited remote villages was worse. The inhabitants lived in utter poverty and dire conditions. For a long time Imazighen felt they were marginalized and treated like second-class citizens.

People in their own country who don’t exist,” complains Mahjoubi Aherdan, the charismatic leader of the National Popular Movement, a political party that represents rural Moroccans, many of whom are Berber.

Until recently Berbers’ language was not taught at school nor recognized. Basic rights such as registering new born babies under Berber names are still flouted. Two significant political events however, have brought into the limelight Berbers demands. The first was external. The politicization of Berber communities in Morocco began to develop in 1980, thanks to Algeria’s Berber Spring. Kabyle’s Berbers uprising provided the momentum and inspiration to Morocco’s Imazighen. As Silverstein puts it:

Transnational Berber Cultural Movement (MCB) that galvanized Moroccan Amazigh ethno-linguistic militancy into a public movement, with conferences and a published journal, Amazigh. As a result there was a proliferation of Amazigh associations and an increased interest in militancy. The popular pressure finally started to pay off. To appease ethnic tensions, the government created in 2001 the ROYAL institute for Amazigh culture and in 2011 and the Amazigh language was adopted as an official language of Morocco alongside Arabic. Now Both Arabic and Amazigh are working languages in the parliament and most of the administrations. However, the formalization of Amazigh has not helped its dissemination for a number of reasons. For example, there are those who oppose it on the ground that it is anti-pedagogical for pupils to learn another alphabet-Tifinagh, in addition to Arabic and French. They
argue it will better to focus on foreign languages than burden the kids with a native language.

In the words of Abdessalam Khalafi Mentalities aren’t ready to integrate Tamazight and give it a chance. There’s a change in discourse, but not yet in practice.’

Consequently Amazigh as a language is struggling to survive. It is primarily taught at primary schools or at some select universities at Master and Doctorate levels. Those palliative measures have not completely satisfied the many active and outspoken Amazigh NGOs. One in a string of their many recent demands is the recognition and institutionalization of an Amazigh year and a national Amazigh Holiday. More radical Imazighen refuse to be identified as Arabs so they reject the appellation of Arabic Maghreb and prefer the Grand Maghreb. Active Imazighen movements are also distancing themselves from mainstream Arab and Muslim feminisms. In this connection, Amina Zioual, President of The Voice of the Amazigh Woman, hammers the point home.

Women’s groups always speak of ‘the Arab woman’ but we are not Arab women — we have an Amazigh culture, language and identity which have nothing to do with the Arab woman from the Middle East.

Are Imazighen women like their male counterparts trying to forge their future based on their cultural, ethnic and ‘pagan’ heritage? The real challenge now is to see how far Imazighen demands for equality with the Arabs can go. The latter are often seen as the oppressor, the outsider and the colonizers. The ones, who spoilt their land and obliterated their identity, Will Imazighen reject the conqueror’s religion and go back to paganism which they believe was ‘matriarchal and ensured women’s superiority? In recent years there have been frequent demands to separate religion from politics it will be interesting to examine whether religious values are being eroded and whether Moroccans are becoming more secular. It will also be interesting to find out which ethnic group is more inclined to turn agnostic or atheist or to convert to another religion. There have been rumors that thousands of Moroccans are annually converted to Christianity. How many are Arabs and how many are Amazighen is hard to tell in the absence of credible data.

3. Secularism vs. Theocracy

The Moroccan constitution stipulates in black white that Islam is the official religion of the country. A staggering 93 per cent of the population are Muslims; remainder is Christian, Jewish minorities and in recent years Bahia sect. Moroccans are Sunni and follow the Maliki doctrine which is considered a moderate form of political Islam The king is the commander of believers and , in this capacity, is and legal guardian of the traditions and religious rites For centuries. Islam practiced in Morocco has been open, tolerant and guaranteed the worship rights of its minorities.

Islam in Morocco is different from the one practiced in many Middle Eastern countries. It’s a soft copy. It is safe to talk about the specificity or the ‘Moroccan exception’.

This is not a secular country, nor one that separates mosque from state. But it is a far different sort of Islam and a far different relationship between mosque and state than in nearly any other country in the world.

The monarchy has always preached and encouraged a modern, tolerant Islam. Islam which respects the rights of its minorities and is complies with international laws and conventions. One could cite the example of Lalla Aicha, Mohamed 5 sister who addressed the public in 1947 unveiled. Her gesture is symbolic of the kind of Islam adopted by the rulers.

This vision has been has been challenged by Islamists, a term which can be misleading as it refers to umbrella of different groups. Inn Driss Bouyahya’s words

The Islamist movements are far from homogenous. Pluralistic by Nature, Moroccan Islamism can be divided into two groups: The Party ofJustice and Development (Hizbo al-adal wa- Tammia, PJD) under the direction of Abdelilah Benkirian, and Justice and Charity (al-adal wal- Ilsan, JC) led by Mohamed Abbadi. All groups and organizations that constituted Islamist movements have different and diverse objectives.

Anouar Boukhars argues that radical Islam was the doing of the Monarchy During the 1980s, the state encouraged the importation of Wahhabism, a retrograde but status quo prone ideology, to counter the growing menace of political Islam Also to counter the emerging influence of left and socialist parties which were seen as real threat against the regime, ‘the Moroccan state turned a blind eye to the surge of Islamism in order to undermine the left’.

The Salafist movement rose to prominence when Sheick Yassine, the founder of Al Adl wai Ilsane, released his inflammatory letter to the late king Hassan 2, titled ‘Islam or the Deluge’ where he questioned the king’s authority as leader of the believers. Yassine was imprisoned many times and assigned to house arrest. His ideas derived from Sufism, Moslem Brotherhood. Simply put his doctrine is based on the rejection of democracy judged a western heresy, return to the origin of its Islam during its days of glory, particularly the time of prophet and his 4 apostles.

In the wake of terrorist attacks in Morocco or abroad attributed to radical Islamists there was a
crackdown on extremist movement. Their leaders were imprisonment and activities monitored. The reformist Islamists chose politics to further their political agenda. After 2011 following the Arab Spring even charismatic leaders of the radical Islamists such as Fizazi, Maghraoui and Rafiki or Chadli have joined political parties. The state has cleverly played one Islamic group against the other. It has carefully co-opted its opponents.

Until recently the penalty for apostasy was harsh: ‘Moroccan Muslims who leave Islam must be sentenced to death.’ In general the majority of Moroccans do not question the importance of religion in their lives but some have started to raise questions about its role and functions in society at large. Questions about freedom of belief and creed and secular Islam are being raised especially by leftist and progressive parties and women’s organizations. One of the indirect consequences of this tug of war between believers and non-believers is the abolition of the apostasy law. In 2015, the same Supreme Council of Religious Scholars who issued the decree annulled it. Does this mean that the authorities are caving in and are favoring a more modern and tolerant version of Islam? And are Moroccans really free to believe or disbelieve or to choose their own religion? And if they choose to disbelieve can they brandish it in public without running the risk of being imprisoned by the authorities or lunched by the mobs? Examples of those who defied secular and theocratic rules abound. One can cite the cases of those who kissed in public or broke the fast in Ramadan or wore indecent clothes and the punishment they received.

4. The Haves vs. the Have-Not

Poverty in Morocco is endemic and the gap between the rich and the poor is ever widening. According to latest statistics released by IMF, Morocco ranks fourth in the Arab world’s poorest country during the 2009-2013 period. It ranked fourth after Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen which were identified as the poorest countries in the Arab World.

Poverty is also mostly rural and varies from region to region. It is estimated that “Of the 4 million people living in poverty in Morocco, 3 million are situated in rural regions.” The causes of poverty are complex and interrelated; they range from natural disasters such as drought, mismanagement of natural resources, unequal division of riches, corruption and failed governmental development plans, to colonization. Whatever the reason what is paramount are the adverse effects of poverty and social injustice on political stability.

In major cities uprisings were a means to denounce social injustice and unpopular government policies. In Fes, in the ‘90s, what started as a peaceful demonstration to denounce pauperization turned into an ugly uncontrolled revolt, with rioters looting private property and setting buses aflame. The army came to the rescue, subdued the protesters and left many dead. These were sad episodes which the majority of Moroccans wish to forget. When Moroccans take to the streets it is not to topple down the regime but mostly to decry rising living costs, social injustice, high scale corruption, poor education and a bankrupt health system. The frustration factor is like a pressure cooker that must let off steam or explode,” writes a commentator in a New York Times article.

In recent years other forms of protests have surfaced and are cause for concern. They may have been inspired by Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who set himself ablaze when local authorities confiscated his wares. Bouazizi is believed to have started the Arab Spring and has inspired other desperate people.

“MOROCCAN STREET VENDOR SETS HERSELF ON FIRE IN PROTEST OF STATE’S REPRESSIVE,” reads a caption in the Jerusalem Post.

What usually starts as a solo act of a desperate individual becomes suddenly emblematic of a whole class of people: the powerless, the destitute and have-nots. Every now and then newspaper headlines relate stories of desperate men and women who torch themselves because their goods were destroyed, or they were evicted from squatted apartments or were refused health care at local hospitals. And when people lose faith in justice, they resort to suicide. A case in point is Fatima Filali, who was forced to marry her rapist. Instead of living with her victimizer she took her own life. Her tragic death triggered popular resentment. Protests were staged by women’s organizations and progressive parties and associations to denounce violence against women and to condemn archaic laws that exonerate the culprit and incriminate the victim. Another victim of poverty is Mohsin Fikri, the fishmonger who was ground like garbage with the fish confiscated from him. Unlike Filali’s death, Fikri’s continues to degenerate into confrontation between the Rif region and the Makhzen or Central government. Fikri has become an emblematic figure. He embodies the old/new conflict between the marginalized, poor and underdeveloped Rif and the more prosperous Morocco. Some active Imazighen associations feel that Fikri’s death is the result of systematic pauperization of the Rif region. Lack of investment, old infrastructure, and high unemployment rates, especially among the youth, were determining factors of the intermittent revolts that spanned the Rif’s history. Nasser Zafzafi one of the leaders of the Alhoceima protests demanded the demilitarization of Alhoceima, and an end to
“hogra”- injustice and proactive economic development of the region. The Makhzen, however, blames the continuing conflict on radical Imazighen like Zafzafi who are financed by secessionist Moroccan Diaspora. They may be nourishing the dream of a separatist Rif.

One could multiply examples of how one single tragic death can easily turn into popular unrest and how these isolated cases can trigger and generate other forms of resistance and demands alongside ethnic or gender lines. Often the Makhzen dispatches peacemakers to broker a deal or to remove form office corrupt high ranking officials. Sometimes, brutal force is used to quell the dispute. In the long run, the carrot and stick policy has shown its limits.

Islamists vs. Modernists

Is Moroccan society being polarized among secular / theocratic lines? Morocco is one of the fewest countries in the Islamic world where it’s hard to draw the line between what is moral, immoral or amoral. The mosque invites the worshippers as bars do non-practicing Muslims. One way to explain the religious divide is to examine one of its many variegated aspects: the dress ethics. When Westerners think of Morocco they assume the Jellabah, this long, loose garment with hood and sleeves worn by men and women, is the national dress. Photos of turbaned men often mistakenly dubbed Touareg roam the net while women draped in sari-like one piece fabric, according to the norm. Nowhere in Morocco was the veil mistakes or done.

The women were arrested and按规定 for the choices they made, the emergence of the Burqa, which is alien to Moroccan culture and Sunni Islam, the official religion of the country, is alarming. A minority of women in black and covered from head to toes are walking the streets or driving cars. Worse, fundamentalists are trying to impose an Islamic dress on the rest of the population. A glaring example is when two young women were almost lynched by a mob in Inezgane, a small town in the South of Morocco. The reason is they were not properly dressed. The women were arrested and would have been sentenced to 2 years in prison for wearing indecent clothes had it not been for the intervention of Amnesty International and public outrage. In a veiled attempt to halt the radicalization of Islamic dress and insidious mounting pressure of the fundamentalists, the government has recently banned the manufacturing and commercialization of the Burqa.

The dress ethic which seems to divide society is only the tip of the iceberg: it translates an identity crisis. There are those who advocate a radical Islamic society based on the prophet’s teachings and fundamental precepts of early Islam. For example, they claim that man’s place is at home, that alcohol should be banned and promiscuity in general combated. At the other of the spectrum, those who were educated in western universities and come from relatively rich families proclaim freedom of religion and a more open Islam. They implicitly encourage free unions, alcohol consumption, musical festivals, co-ed schools and gender equality. The majority of Moroccans continue to live their lives like their grandparents: fasting praying and waiting for the Day of Judgment. Religion is a way of life to be taken for granted and not questioned.

5. Conclusions

This paper has tried to pinpoint the challenges that Morocco has faced and will continue to face. In order for the country to remain what it has always been- peaceful, open, tolerant, the Makhzen needs to swiftly address some urgent
issues. One of the vital keys to any reform of society is freedom of speech and of creed. Equally important is the equality of its citizens whether males or females, Arabs or Imazighen before the law. While some would argue the constitution safeguards these rights and negates any form of discrimination, in practice, however, there are many loopholes. To start with, granting Imazighen cultural rights including revalorization of their heritage, language and identity is the best way to assuage their fears and frustrations. At the same time, the country needs to deal firmly with radical Imazighen associations that secretly wish for independence. Demonizing the Arabs as invaders and colonizers and brandishing Imazighen flag at the slightest injustice should be combated. To counteract the secessionist intentions, in 2011 the king pleaded for an advanced model of regionalization ‘based on four fundamental aspects: a strong commitment to the nation’s sacred and immutable values (the unity of the state, of the nation and of the territory); the principle of solidarity; a balanced distribution of resources between powers and local authorities, central government and the institutions concerned; and the adoption of an extensive devolution within the framework of an efficient territorial governance system based on harmony and convergence’.

Morocco needs also to address the gender gap and sexual discrimination by empowering women and treating them on an equal footing like men. Sexual harassment and violence should cease and early and forced marriages and rape severely sanctioned. Most importantly ensuring parity in the administration, parliament and political parties will send a strong signal to the rest of the world that the situation of woman has changed for the best. Another ambitious workshop in democracy is political reform. Morocco is not a Constitutional Monarchy where ‘the king reigns but doesn’t rule’ to paraphrase Thomas Macaulay. The Moroccan constitution delineates clearly the powers and prerogatives of the king and those of the parliament. The last constitution, considered an improvement on the early ones, stipulates ‘The king will remain the supreme commander of the army and a new article formalized him as the highest religious authority in the country. It is also true that the new constitution elevates ‘the prime minister to the “head of government” and ensures he is selected from the party that received the most votes in election, rather than just chosen by the king.’ But in the ongoing struggle for power many feel that the king’s prerogatives outweigh those of the prime minister. For example, the king appoints sovereign ministers; namely, those of foreign affairs, interior, Habous or religious affairs. The end result is a weakening of political parties and their ability to mobilize voters. Consequently there is growing dissatisfaction with politics, especially among young people who feel it is hopeless to vote since elections only serve to perpetuate the status quo or when the results are a foregone conclusion.

Additionally Morocco will likely continue to tread a fine line: westernizing the country without negating its traditions and Islamic specificity. While radical fundamentalists would like to apply a more rigid and literal interpretation of Islamic teachings and their universal application to societal problems, radical feminists and ultra liberal thinkers are questioning the preponderance of Islam in politics and everyday life. There are simply calling for separation of the private and public spheres. Religion, they argue, is a private affair... One good example of bone of contention is the inheritance law. ‘Islam allots women half the share of inheritance available to men who have the same degree of relation to the decedent’.

Feminists are questioning the ‘apparent gender discrimination and demand its repeal. This is a thorny issue; that’s why the king as commander of believers had to step in to arbitrate the case. He basically said he can’t allow what God forbids nor forbid what God allows. The case is momentarily closed. Sexual freedom, LGBT’s sexual rights, as well as the right to convert to other religions are issues which will continue to heighten tensions between the belligerents. In my humble opinion the root of all evil is poverty. As long as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, as long as the riches of the country are not equally distributed and if the distinction between ‘the useful’ and ‘non-useful’ regions is not abolished, social upheaval, popular uprising will go crescendo. To fight social injustice, nepotism, political corruption requires political will. And to invest in education, health and infrastructure, and job yielding activities is the antidote to ignorance, bigotry and all forms of extremism.

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