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The Democratic Imperative vs. the Authoritarian Impulse: The Maghreb State between Transition and Terrorism

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 6 (June 2005)

by [John P. Entelis](#)

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Introduction

Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia stand at a crucial crossroad in their political evolution as they face simultaneous challenges from domestic, regional, and global forces. Despite all surface appearances to the contrary, all three Maghrebi states are governed autocratically. As such, they will be unable to meet the upcoming threats to their political stability, social cohesion, cultural integrity, and economic viability. One result will be increased domestic, regional, and global tensions as militant forces seep through these sociopolitical fault lines finding support from and identification with similarly discontented co-religionists living in Europe. Terrorism is the most extreme manifestation of this diffused discontent made “legitimate” through an Islamic idiom of martyrdom.

The demands for political pluralism, democracy, and transparency continue to make themselves felt both within and outside society.^[1] The Broader Middle East Initiative^[2] is but one important and highly visible such effort originating from Washington but similar appeals derive from diverse sources including international human rights organizations, NGO’s, domestic political opponents both secular and Islamist, multilateral lending institutions, and regional groupings like the Arab League which has produced two scathing reports, co-published with the United Nations Development Program (UNPD), on the absence of political freedoms in all of the Arab world.^[3]

Economically and socially as well, the demands for visible improvements in living standards and the quality life cut across diverse social classes and occupational groupings. Despite repeated promises by ruling elites of significant improvements in macro- and micro-economic performance through accelerated structural adjustments, expanded privatization efforts, increased foreign direct investment, implementing transparency and the rule of law, rooting out corruption and nepotism, and creating an overall environment conducive to productive human effort, the full potential of all three Maghrebi economies remains unrealized.

These combined failures in the political and socioeconomic spheres have impacted negatively on migration flows and levels of foreign remittances. Such disruptions in critical financial life-lines have disoriented co-religionists on both sides of the Mediterranean as Maghrebis surviving

precariously in ghetto-like suburbs outside large, prosperous European cities mirror the situation of many of their Arab brothers and sisters living in the “homelands.”[4]

Such conditions of political oppression, social marginalization, economic deprivation, and cultural alienation, whether perceived or real, have created a wide-ranging landscape of disaffected young people ever ready to engage in militant activity often catalyzed by religious invocation and Islamist appeal inspiring, among the most fanatical among them, a sense of martyrdom justifying the use of terror including suicide bombing.[5]

Thus, there now exists a complex and intricate web of interrelated forces connecting autocratic political orders with anemic levels of socioeconomic development impacting most directly a broad swathe of alienated and angry youth at home and abroad who find salvation in the cathartic appeals of a puritanical Islam communicated in the militant language of the urban mosque and the charismatic imam.[6]

To the extent that the West in general and the United States in particular are perceived as deeply implicated in the maintenance of this “unjust” system based on “oppression” and “exploitation,” they will be the natural targets for terrorists and terrorism. If this cycle of violence rooted in a complex interdependency is to be broken, it must begin with political change in the Maghreb itself.

This *Strategic Insight’s* principal finding sees no fundamental political change taking place in any of the three North African countries in the near or intermediate future.[7] Indeed, rather than “transitions to democracy” occurring as many have suggested and even more have hoped, a “robust authoritarianism” has been maintained. At the same time, however, a vibrant civil society is also emerging which potentially can serve as the natural challenge to the autocratic state and thereby facilitate the evolution of a political society within which democracy can be nurtured, liberal or otherwise.[8] Yet, to date, the state has succeeded in manipulating, co-opting, or coercing civil society’s most politically potent organizations—mass-based political parties both secular and Islamist.[9]

Methodology

The research for this paper derives from field interviews, meetings, and discussions while on lecture tours in Tunis, Tunisia (March 4-11, 2004) and Madrid, Spain (May 9-16, 2004) with a broad range of North African and European students, professors, media personnel, government officials, opposition figures, and Islamic activists. It is supplemented by journalistic, governmental, business, scholarly, and political risk assessment data gathered through primary and secondary sources in the United States, Europe, and North Africa.

Despite the current preoccupation among academics and analysts with “democratic transition” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), no such transition has taken place anywhere in the region if only because the necessary precondition—the collapse of authoritarianism—has yet to take place.[10] Save for the fully democratic election of nonstate actor Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority on January 9, 2005, no Arab leader has ever arrived to national-level power democratically. It is thus premature to assess either the conditions for democracy’s emergence or its eventual consolidation when political power remains firmly in the hands of the authoritarian state best represented by the tripartite pillars of control and coercion—the military, the business technocracy, and the executive, whether presidential or monarchical.

To be sure, the system’s harshest features have been softened through the establishment of so-called “liberal autocracies,” “illiberal democracies,”[11] or “quasi-democracies” involving “guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression”[12] as currently in evidence, for example, in Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, Kuwait, Algeria, and Egypt. Yet, in the final analysis, and despite a multitude of separate and overlapping domestic pressures and external incentives for substantive

democratic change, power remains as it always has—in the hands of the unaccountable few governing over the unrepresented many.

The Authoritarian Impulse

Michael Hudson's prescient observation about Arab politics made nearly thirty years ago is still fully applicable: "The central problem of government in the Arab world today is political legitimacy. The shortage of this indispensable political resource largely accounts for the volatile nature of Arab politics and the autocratic...character of all present governments."[\[13\]](#)

Numerous scholars have sought to explain this legitimacy deficit and the concurrent durability of authoritarianism in the Arab world by identifying a number of overlapping causal and contributing factors. These conditions revolve around several broad categories of interpretation—economic explanations,[\[14\]](#) cultural causes,[\[15\]](#) political determinants,[\[16\]](#) patterns of societal-state formation,[\[17\]](#) the role of religion,[\[18\]](#) and gender-based factors.[\[19\]](#) Despite the current appeal of culturally-based explanations for the authoritarian impulse, most analysts privilege more complex dynamics "involving economic growth and stagnation, social-structural transformation, state formation and institutional inertia, and ideological transformation."[\[20\]](#)

The strength, coherence, and effectiveness of the state's coercive apparatus serve to highlight the "robustness" of authoritarianism. It is this robustness that provides the most useful framework of analysis in attempting to explain North Africa's enduring authoritarianism. What are the broader comparative and theoretical assumptions about state capabilities, and will that help explain the sustainability of the security establishment (*mukhabarat*) in the face of internal challenges and external pressures?

Focusing on the enabling capabilities of the national security state, Eva Bellin identifies the following determinative conditions: the status of a country's fiscal health including access to rentier income in the form of oil and gas resources, geostrategic utility, and control of crucial transit facilities; the level and kind of international support networks; the degree of institutionalization of the military and whether it operates according to legal-rational criteria or patrimonial ones; the existence of popular political mobilization; and the use of perceived or real threats to state security.[\[21\]](#)

These do not encompass the full universe of possible reasons why North African authoritarianism remains so robust but it does identify critical structural factors that transcend issues of culture, history, personality, or religion that have often been invoked by analysts trying to explain MENA's non-democratic "exceptionalism."[\[22\]](#) One researcher has usefully summarized this overall pattern by stating that "a set of interdependent institutional, economic, ideological, social, and geostrategic factors has created an adaptable ecology of repression, control, and partial openness. The weblike quality of this political ecosystem both helps partial autocracies to survive and makes their rulers unwilling to give up final control over any strand of the whole."[\[23\]](#)

Each of the variables identified above applies to the Maghreb.

Fiscal Health

It has been shown from experiences in Africa and elsewhere that there is a direct link between the state's coercive capabilities and the maintenance of fiscal health. The *mukhabarat* cannot long endure if it lacks the financial resources to pay its soldiers, purchase arms, upgrade equipment, maintain supplies, and acquire externally-gathered intelligence data. When presumed to be strong states began to collapse in Africa, for example, as Bellin reminds us, it was because prolonged fiscal crisis had "hollowed out" the coercive apparatus of the state.[\[24\]](#)

In North Africa, while economies underperform and human and material resources are underutilized, the overall fiscal health of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia is sufficiently robust to sustain more than adequate expenditures on security apparatuses. In fact, the Maghreb ranks noticeably above average in the proportion of GNP spent on security approaching five percent in 2000 as compared to the global average of 3.8 percent.

Rentier income derived from such critical resources as oil and gas enable strong states to sustain elaborate coercive structures even if a country's overall economic health is poor as the case of Algeria so clearly demonstrates. While Morocco and Tunisia may lack these valuable resources in large enough quantities to make a financial difference, other strategic rents such as foreign aid, tourism revenues, remittances from abroad, and so forth serve the same function of insuring that the state will pay itself first including covering the costs of maintaining bloated military and security forces.[\[25\]](#)

It should be noted that "strong" states are being defined in a narrow coercive sense not as possessing enduring political legitimacy. Indeed, Ayubi's distinction between a "strong" state and a "fierce" state applies directly to the North African situation. As with the rest of the Arab world, the Maghreb state "is not a natural growth of its own socio-economic history or its own cultural and intellectual tradition."[\[26\]](#) Instead, the North African state can better be understood as "fierce" since, in order to preserve itself, it resorts to the use of raw power as its default function. It is not "strong" because the Maghreb state "lacks the infrastructural power that enables [it] to penetrate society effectively through mechanisms such as taxation. [It also] lacks ideological hegemony (in a Gramscian sense) that would enable it to forge a historic social bloc that accepts the legitimacy of the ruling stratum."[\[27\]](#)

The state's "fierce" attributes are reinforced by its rentier status that enables the country's fiscal health to remain disconnected from society's productive economic forces yet directly tied to the international political economy with its critical hydrocarbon lifeline. The connection between abundant oil rents and the aggrandizement of the authoritarian state, at the expense of an autonomous civil society, cannot be overemphasized. Sadiki summarizes this relationship accurately when he writes:

[T]he huge returns from external oil rent have contributed primarily to aggrandizement of the state...This aggrandizement applies to both oil producers and non-producers. The former directly accrue billions of petrodollars from external oil rent. The latter....profit from the Arab oil boom....This latter group has become partly rentier economies. They rent labor, skills, and expertise to the scarcely populated Arab oil-producing states and thereby earn billions of dollars in remittances. Transfers of millions of Arab petrodollars either in the form of aid or investment are another factor in the equation. Petrodollars have endowed the Arab state with an independent resource to cement and reproduce itself.[\[28\]](#)

International Support

More than any other world region, the MENA's sustained authoritarianism has been shaped by the successful maintenance of international support networks. While the Middle East portion of MENA has exploited these networks more extensively than the Maghreb, the latter has become a critical staging area in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Representative examples of terrorist activities occurring in or originating from the region include the prolonged bloodletting taking place in Algeria since 1992,[\[29\]](#) the terrorist bombing in Djerba in April 2002, the Casablanca suicide attacks in May 2003, the deadly explosions in Madrid in March 2004, and the murder of controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004, in Amsterdam by a Moroccan militant with ties to al-Qaeda. The war against global terrorism has significantly raised the Maghreb's geopolitical profile especially in American eyes. In so doing, fighting terrorism has

joined access to reliable oil and gas supplies as two key concerns justifying intense foreign involvement with existing army-backed regimes in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

A series of recent military and security actions provide more evidence that the “footprint” of United States armed forces is spreading steadily through the Maghreb and the neighboring Sahel region. Its most public expression is the administration’s Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), originally conceived by State Department planners in 2002 as a means of beefing up Sahelian armed forces against the terrorist threat, but finally implemented in mid-January 2004 as a means of cracking down on al-Qaeda’s penetration of countries like Mali and Niger, but also Algeria and Mauritania via groups like the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat).[30]

Working to prevent the Sahel from becoming “another Afghanistan” where Islamic militants train and prepare for terrorist operations worldwide, the PSI and Washington’s new interest in regions like southern Algeria fits into a global geostrategic vision that dovetails with Algeria’s own domestic political agenda including maintaining a robust authoritarian state. While unconfirmed, there are reports that U.S. special forces have been sent to the Algerian Sahara to work along with regional forces in combating al-Qaida.[31] Unusually for an operation that brought superpower forces to their borders, the Algerians did not seem overly concerned. This response has much to do with the courting by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, newly-reelected in April 2004, of the United States as an ally in the war on terror, the Algerian authorities’ openness to creating new alliances after a decade of effective isolation due to the conflict with radical Islam, and the Algerian security forces’ need for help to be effective against mobile armed gangs in the vast Saharan deep south.[32]

Related to the above has been a dramatic increase in funding for United States-based training of Algerian military officers under the IMET (International Military Education and Training) program with almost \$600,000 provided for such training in 2003 as compared to only \$30,000 in 2002. While these policies are intended to gain greater security for U.S. global interests, they also have the counterproductive result of making the *mukhabarat* state more robust and thus less inclined to accede to societal demands for greater democracy.[33]

To a lesser extent, the same kind of U.S. and international support has been accorded both Morocco and Tunisia. In 2003, for example, the United States decided to give Morocco \$60 million to assist in the fight against terrorism as well as for development programs. On June 3, 2004, the United States granted Morocco the status of “major non-NATO ally” and, on June 15, 2004, signed a free-trade agreement with the Kingdom.

Among the unintended consequences of increased U.S. and other international military, political, and economic assistance to all three Maghrebi countries has been a clamp down on press freedoms, increased violations of human rights through random arrests of hundreds if not thousands of so-called Islamic terrorists in Morocco, and a general deterioration of political and civil rights.[34] It is within such a degraded political environment that terrorism finds its most willing recruits.

As Bellin has pointed out, in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa, the withdrawal of international backing for authoritarian states “triggered both an existential and financial crisis for the regimes that often devastated both their will and capacity to carry on.”[35] Not only are such international withdrawals highly unlikely in the Maghreb but, as reported above, the region enjoys a unique position in the international arena that, given the importance of access to hydrocarbons and meeting the continuing challenge of Islamic terrorism, seems destined to be maintained into the indefinite future.

Patrimonialism

The Maghreb security apparatuses are shot through with patrimonial influences seriously compromising their rational-legal, professional, and institutionalized pretensions.[36] While Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia possess “professional” security forces, they are organized along patrimonial lines in which staffing decisions are ruled by cronyism, the distinction between public and private mission is blurred, leading to flagrant corruption and abuse of power, and discipline is maintained through exploitation of primordial cleavage. In all three countries patrimonial linkages between the regime and the security apparatus are so deeply enmeshed that, in reference to Algeria, it has been said that “every state has an army but in Algeria the army has a state.”[37] Simply put, the conflation between authoritarian civilian regimes and the military enhances the state’s robustness which is further deepened by the patrimonial logic that is so endemic in the Maghreb.

The terrorist challenge confronting the region has worked to enhance state security resources through increased domestic expenditures for the military and expanded foreign arms assistance. Rather than forcing a further professionalization or institutionalization of the security apparatus, however, such increases have deepened patrimonial privileges to the advantage of state authority and at the expense of civil society.

In all three Maghrebi countries the *mukhabarat* constitutes the state’s most advantaged institution serving as the bastion of elite privilege and guardian of regime interests. Even Tunisia’s security apparatus, once modest by Arab world standards, has ballooned under President Ben Ali, himself a military man.[38] The decade-long civil war in Algeria and Morocco’s thirty-year struggle in the Western Sahara have further empowered the armed forces of both states.

It seems unlikely that the authoritarian state will soon wither away or voluntarily relinquish power as long as the security apparatus, the linchpin of state survival, is shot through with patrimonialism in which personalism pervades staffing decisions, political reliability supersedes merit in promotions, intercorps and intracorps discipline is maintained by relying on balanced rivalry between primordial groups, the distinction between public and private is not scrupulously observed, and the military continues to serve as a major path to personal enrichment.[39]

Popular Mobilization

In other situations and in different world regions, the authoritarian state’s ability to maintain itself in power has been shaped by the degree to which it faces a high level of popular mobilization. Violently repressing or killing thousands of people in order to maintain authority carries huge political costs for the regime and is thus not used lightly or regularly. What is astonishing, but common, in the Maghreb is how infrequent and limited such popular mobilization has taken place in the modern period. Either society remains eerily passive, as in present day Tunisia, or it erupts into civil war, as in Algeria.

This is not to suggest that North Africa has not experienced or continues to experience sporadic social unrest, labor strikes, student demonstrations, or even anarchic outbursts as in the Berber uprising of 1980 and the October riots of 1988 in Algeria. Yet such public expressions of social discontent are rarely rooted in organized political movements reflecting ideological coherence and political purpose that would serve serious notice to state incumbents that the peoples’ wants and demands are to be taken seriously.[40] Nowhere in North Africa and indeed throughout the Arab world, for example, “do mammoth, cross-class coalitions mobilize on the streets to push for reform” thus making the costs of repression relatively low for the regime.[41]

Only among Islamists have popular forces been capable of being mobilized in large numbers sufficient enough to force incumbent regimes to think seriously about political reform including the possibility of legitimizing a democratic transition.[42] Yet, in every instance where political Islam has posed such a challenge in the Arab world, as in the cases of Jordan, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt,

Tunisia, Syria, and Morocco for example, the state has ultimately decided either to violently suppress such movements (Algeria, Egypt, Syria) or apply a combination of harsh legal constraints and political co-optation to delimit the movement's influence as in Jordan and Yemen (Tunisia has utilized both force and legal constraints). Where coercive measures have been applied, all three countries of North Africa have found external support, either directly or indirectly, for their actions. France and the United States, for example, were virtually silent when the army staged a *coup d'état* against an impending Islamist parliamentary victory in Algeria in January 1992.^[43]

As long as civil societies exhibit a variety of socio-economic and cultural cleavages and remain seriously divided along religious-secular, urban-rural, male-female, modern-traditional, literate-illiterate, and indigenous-global lines, it will be difficult for high levels of popular mobilization to develop thus facilitating the state's ability to repress political reform and choose coercion over compromise when such challenges do emerge. It seems highly unlikely, for example, that what successfully transpired in Iran under the Islamic revolution will be duplicated anytime soon in the Maghreb. Indeed, the Iranian experience has served as an object lesson of what incumbent regimes need to do to insure that neither revolution nor democracy erupts in the Arab world.

The Question of Palestine

Probably no single issue has so mobilized state and society in the Arab world as the question of Palestine. The conflict between Israel and Palestine touches virtually every emotional and political chord among Arabs serving as the touchstone of Arab identity, integrity, and importance. To be sure the military threat posed by Israel can serve as additional fodder for regimes seeking to further empower the security apparatus. Yet, as one researcher has accurately observed, "the arc of authoritarianism in the [MENA] region far exceeds the fly-zone of the Israeli air force; that is, countries far removed from the epicenter of the [Palestinian-Israeli] conflict still share the region's propensity for robust coercive apparatuses."^[44]

Thus, the Palestinian issue in the Maghreb is less about enhancing security to protect against "Zionist aggression" as it is about further advantaging the state in its ability to stand up to the ideological, political, global as well as military challenge that Israel represents to the Arab world. The continuous suffering taking place in Palestine as communicated daily on national and satellite television serves to antagonize and anger vast majorities of Maghrebi peoples. Yet, rather than being transformed into an effective agent of popular mobilization against authoritarian rule, such anger is co-opted by incumbent regimes to further justify robust state power.

Like Islamism, the question of Palestine has been effectively integrated into the political language of the state as a way to disarm and delegitimize potential opponents. This tactic of ideological cooptation of key symbols of popular mobilization such as Islamism and Palestine have undercut the ability of autonomous groups to develop a truly democratic if not liberal Islam while making compromise on the Palestinian issue more difficult to achieve. As one observer has correctly pointed out, "the greatest obstacle to democracy is posed not by Islam but by military and intelligence organizations unaccountable to democratic authority."^[45] The result is a robust authoritarian state secure in the knowledge that neither domestic, regional, nor international forces can fundamentally alter its autocratic practices which, in any case, have increasingly been re-packaged as experiments in "democracy," "liberalism," and "reform."

State-Society Dynamics

Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia confront serious political, security, and socioeconomic challenges that only political reform and institutionalized democracy can help solve. Yet, in all three cases, robust authoritarianism rather than effective reform dominates regime policies. As reported above, several interrelated variables help explain this condition of enhanced state authority in the face of

challenges from an increasingly animated civil society. Yet one wonders how long such inherently conflictual conditions can obtain without causing further problems some leading to the kind of extremist politics currently evident both within and outside the region.

This article has argued that terrorism is one outcome of the failure to fundamentally reform and restructure Maghrebi political orders. It is no accident that despite widely varied socioeconomic conditions all three countries remain politically autocratic. Tunisia, for example, represents an exceptional case of a very successful albeit incomplete economic and social transformation.

Tunisia

Since my last visit to the country in 1993, for example, significant progress has been made in the country's overall development. Tunisia today is a fully modern country with impressive quantitative and qualitative indicators supporting such a conclusion. I was particularly impressed by the level of political awareness and consciousness among society's educated classes and their ability and willingness to talk openly about sensitive political issues albeit in private gatherings yet in public places.

Given this high level of socioeconomic development, cultural consciousness, and political sophistication it was that much more striking to observe the continued maintenance of a security state with all the trappings of police surveillance and intimidation.^[46] The widening gap between society's material prosperity—nearly seventy-five percent of Tunisians own their own home—and its political primitiveness is reaching crisis proportions. Despite its draconian security measures, for example, the regime was unable to stop terrorists from attacking a Djerba synagogue in April 2002 nor prevent scores, maybe even hundreds, of Tunisian nationals living in Europe and elsewhere from participating in terrorist activities including involvement in the train bombings in Spain in March 2004.^[47]

The pattern of state-led oppression has been maintained through a fused system of social liberalization on the one hand and political subjugation on the other. Yet this framework of control and coercion is operationalized through a democratic façade intended to convey a sense that democracy is alive and well in Tunisia. The most recent such exercise in political manipulation took place with the October 2004 presidential and legislative elections.

Electoral Engineering

To the surprise of no one, on October 24, 2004, Tunisians turned out in record numbers—91.5 percent of the country's 4.6 million eligible voters—to re-elect President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to a fourth consecutive five-year term. Voters also gave his ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD-Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique), an overwhelming victory in parliamentary elections held on the same day.

The election results were never in doubt once Ben Ali had pushed through a constitutional amendment, approved in a landslide referendum in May 2002, that eliminated the three-term limit for presidents. Intentionally or not, Ben Ali seems to be following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, whom he overthrew in a "constitutional coup" on November 7, 1987, partially in response to Bourguiba's self-designation as "president for life."

The early optimism that the post-Bourguiba era would see the arrival of political pluralism if not democracy has been all but extinguished in the last fifteen years as the president and his ruling party have come to dominate the political scene while eradicating all sources of opposition, secular or religious. To be sure, the regime has been enormously successful in pursuing progressive social policies as regards women's rights and in advancing economic development--

the country's gross national product (GNP) per capita tops \$3,500. But this success has simply added to the discontinuity that defines the Tunisian paradox in which enhanced material well-being coexists alongside a robust political authoritarianism.

In part to offset a negative political profile among actual and potential foreign allies and investors, the regime has contrived a carefully crafted but thoroughly transparent pseudo-democracy predicated on a tightly controlled political pluralism and predetermined electoral outcomes. The October 2004 elections are the most recent manifestation of this political ploy.

Determined to solidify his "democratic" credentials among his own people and his supporters in Europe and the United States, Ben Ali permitted three non-threatening candidates to contest his re-election, as compared to two competitors in 1999 and none in 1994 and 1989. Of these challengers, only Mohamed Ali Halouani, head of the Ettajdid Party (ex-Communist) and representing a bloc of independent politicians under the "Democratic Initiative" label, publicly decried the results after obtaining just 0.95 percent of the vote. Mohamed Bouchiha, secretary-general of the Popular Unity Party (PUP-Parti de l'Unité Populaire), who also happens to be related to Ben Ali's wife, received 3.78 percent while Mounir Béji of the Liberal Social Party (PSL-Parti Social Libéral) obtained 0.79 percent.

None of these government-approved candidates has a significant political following nor does any challenge the President's personality or policies. In the view of regime supporters, Ben Ali's "modest" 94.48 percent victory, down from his previous highs of 99.7 percent, 99.6 percent, and 99.4 percent in 1989, 1994, and 1999 respectively, highlights the "contested" nature of the presidential election.

The outcome of the parliamentary election paralleled that of the presidency. While not constitutionally mandated, four-fifths of the legislature's seats are effectively reserved for the ruling party while the remaining twenty percent are contested by the country's seven officially sanctioned opposition parties. Thus, of the total 189 seats in the unicameral parliament, the RCD won 152, and the remaining 37 seats were distributed among the Social Democratic Movement (MDS-Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes), the PUP, the Union of Democratic Unionist (UDU-Union Démocratique Unioniste), Ettajdid, and PSL.

The ruling party is especially proud of its commitment to make at least twenty-five percent of its candidates women. RCD women won thirty-nine seats, compared to twenty in the previous parliament. Overall, forty-three of the 189 newly-elected deputies are women, one of the highest levels in the world. Unfortunately for both men and women legislators, however, the Chamber of Deputies plays a marginal political role and its influence over national policy is virtually nil.

None of the opposition parties represented in parliament challenge the regime's hegemony or the absolute power of the presidency. The "real" opposition is banned, imprisoned, or harassed. It includes the still-popular Islamist party, An Nahda, headed by Rachid Ghannouchi, who lives in self-imposed exile in London. Modernist and secular figures representing a broad spectrum of political tendencies from liberal democrats (Moncef Marzouki) to communists (Hamma Hammami) to progressive socialists (Nejib Chebbi) have all decried the blatantly manipulative character of the political process. Outspoken journalists, human rights activists, academics, lawyers, and other public personalities have joined them in condemning the oppressive nature of political life where the media is tightly controlled, the Internet monitored, and freedom of political expression all but banned. Marzouki's description of Ben Ali's three-pronged policy accurately reflects the way this leader is perceived by these and other democratically inclined groups: "To remain indefinitely in power, to remain indefinitely in power, to remain indefinitely in power."^[48]

Morocco

Morocco faces greater and potentially more lethal challenges as its socioeconomic performance remains modest at best and its political opening tepid and uneven. The Casablanca attacks of May 16, 2003, exposed the country's vulnerabilities and the degree to which Moroccan nationals have been deeply implicated in a global network of loosely interrelated terrorist groups. My meetings in Spain with European and Moroccan respondents, for example, revealed the intensity of commitment to "militant Islam" as compared to the monarchy's attempt to project a "moderate Islam."

Much of Morocco's militancy has been self-induced. A radical interpretation of Islamic belief has become increasingly appealing to those frustrated by the failure of secular policies to deal with poverty, inequality and corruption, and radical groups ready to use violence and terrorism have emerged. In addition, Wahabism has been propagated by preachers from Saudi Arabia and has won adherents, particularly among the marginalized classes of the urban areas. Wahabi clerics were allowed to carry on their work because Saudi Arabia has been an important source of investment and financial aid for Morocco, and the Moroccan and Saudi royal families have long had close ties.

Prior to the Casablanca suicide bombings, the authorities had arrested members of radical Islamist groups active in the poorer neighborhoods of major Moroccan cities that had used violence to enforce their vision of Islam. They also began to shut down unauthorized mosques, and ban bookshops and itinerant booksellers peddling radical and inflammatory Islamist texts and prerecorded tapes. However, these measures did not prevent the 2003 suicide attacks, and, indeed, may even have helped to provoke them.

The current wave of Islamic militancy in Morocco has spread across the globe with evidence that Moroccan radicals, some with military training in Afghanistan, are deeply involved in terrorist activities. Moroccans have been implicated in terrorist networks involved in the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, the attacks in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia in May 2003, and, most recently, the suicide bombings in Spain in 2004. According to intelligence reports, the Madrid bombers belonged to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM, Groupe islamiste combattant marocain), formed in Afghanistan with links to Salafia Jihadia (Salafiyya Jihadiyya, or Jihad for Pure Islam), a Moroccan extremist Islamist movement accused by Rabat of carrying out the Casablanca suicide bombings. One of those arrested in Spain is Jamal Zougam, who is reported to have links with both Mohamed Fizazi, the founder of Salafia al-Jhadia currently in jail serving a thirty-year sentence, and Amer Azizi, a Moroccan charged in 2003 with belonging to an al-Qaida cell that helped to plan the September 11th attacks.[\[49\]](#)

Evidence provided by investigatory journalists, intelligence services, and government officials in Morocco and Spain provides a chilling portrait of how frustrated, discontented, and deeply angry Moroccan youth living in poor quarters of big cities especially in the north have been recruited to militant activities, with some receiving training in Afghanistan, and then transformed into human explosives prepared to commit suicide in the name of some primordial interpretation of Islam that guarantees instant salvation through martyrdom. Many of these Islamists returning from Afghanistan have also found recruits among wealthier Moroccans who span two worlds but, frustrated by their secondary status in Europe, discovered in political Islam a purpose.

"My brothers were not like this when they left Morocco," said Jamal Benyaich, scion of a rich Tangier family whose eldest brother, Abdelaziz, has emerged as a central figure in the Moroccan militant network. Jamal's other brothers, Salaheddin and Abdullah, both became Islamic fighter, too. "They became Islamists in Europe," he said. "All of them lived a very European life in Morocco but came back with a new personality."[\[50\]](#)

This is not to suggest that the European experience has been determinative in transforming *beurs* into jihadists.[\[51\]](#) But one insiders account of his Algerian "assassin brothers" does present a complex interaction of diverse experiences involving the workings of a jihadist cell, the

radicalizing effects of exile from the Algerian civil war, and the challenges for a Western democracy (France) of assimilating Muslim immigrants.[52] Although focusing specifically on Algerian militants in France, the making of a jihadist terrorist described by Sifaoui applies broadly across the Maghreb.

The depth of terrorist activity involving Moroccans both in Europe and in Morocco itself was highlighted in a July 25, 2004, article in *El Pais*, Spain's largest and most widely read newspaper, which reported the results of a government investigation into the Madrid bombings. According to Spanish investigators, Moroccan authorities had informed Madrid that it had lost track of 400 of the 600 Moroccans known to have trained in terrorist camps run by al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The article also reported that Morocco had told Spanish officials that it had more than 2,000 Islamic militants within its borders. Of the roughly sixty men suspected to be connected to the March 11, 2004, train bombings in Madrid, forty are from Morocco, the article said. According to the Spanish judge heading the investigation into al-Qaeda's presence in Spain, "the most serious problem that Europe has right now with this type of terrorism is in Morocco." [53]

In a separate but related terrorist investigation, Spanish authorities in October 2004 charged and jailed thirty-three Moroccans and Algerians involved in an alleged plot to slam a truck carrying 1,100 pounds of explosives into Madrid's National Court which is overseeing Spain's anti-terror investigation related to the Madrid bombings of March 2004.[54]

The ideological and operational fusion of in-country and overseas Moroccan militants have raised the stakes for the government whose survivalist strategy has led it to further limit rather than expand political and civil rights. Since the passage of a tough new anti-terrorism law that was rushed through the parliament in 2003 following the Casablanca bombings, thousands of terrorism suspects have been arrested. Numerous trials of arrested Islamic radicals have taken place with harsh sentences meted out to many. The result has been a return to some of the regime's worst authoritarian excesses as practiced under Hassan II including flagrant abuses of human rights, including arbitrary arrest, torture, and unfair trials.[55]

The monarch's July 2004 decision to build twenty new mosques throughout the country to operate under tight government supervision as a way by which to counter the plethora of unofficial mosques in which self-appointed imams preach radical Islamic precepts reflects the regime's basic incomprehension of the nature of the challenge which it faces which remains, at bottom, fundamentally political.

Algeria

In Algeria political liberalization in the form of relatively free albeit controlled presidential elections seems to be taking hold without necessarily, however, compromising the state's ultimate command and control of polity and economy.[56] President Bouteflika's resounding electoral victory on April 8, 2004, when he secured eighty-five percent of the registered vote, provides the Algerian leader with another five years to try to overcome the country's dismal socioeconomic conditions.[57] As discussed earlier, a country's fiscal health works to enhance the position and power of the security apparatus. With oil prices approaching the fifty dollars per barrel range in mid-2004, Algeria's macro economic profile has improved. This has done little, however, to ameliorate the country's micro economic condition which still finds ordinary Algerians struggling with the basic necessities of life.

In the absence of a thorough and unambiguous democratic transformation of political life and notwithstanding the reported forced resignation in July 2004 of General Mohammed Lamari, the army's most influential figure,[58] most Algerians still believe that Bouteflika's election serves merely to consolidate the power of the shadowy military elite that has held sway in one form or another since independence in 1962. In the Algerian press, robust and independent-minded by

Arab standards.[59] commentators have drawn parallels between Bouteflika and the Tunisian president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, accusing him of seeking to emulate the centralization of power achieved by his autocratic neighbor who, as discussed above, successfully amended the constitution so that he could run for a fourth term in October 2004 following his 99+ percent victories in 1989, 1994, and 1999.[60]

While daily violence has declined and terrorist attacks reduced including the killing and capture of leading GSPC figures,[61] the Algerian government's human rights record as reported by numerous human rights monitoring organizations remains poor to very bad. Arbitrary arrests, prolonged incommunicado detentions, excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, reported cases of torture, and official impunity have all been identified as routine practices of the regime. Similarly, deprivations of basic human and civil rights have taken place in the areas of speech, assembly, and political activity. Even *Al-Jazeera's* Algiers bureau was forced to close following critical reports of the country's security laws that have led to increases in short-term disappearances of prisoners deemed "threats to national security."

To be sure, until the armed insurgency and its expanding links to al-Qaida's jihad are completely squelched, the Algerian "crisis" will continue. Yet more decisively will be the need to resolve the system's fundamental constitutional questions—"the armed forces' political role, presidential prerogatives, judicial independence, and, more generally, the problem of establishing law-bound government." [62]

The Democratic Imperative

North Africa's authoritarian impulse has sabotaged, at great human cost, all efforts to advance the region's developmental goals. Rentier-based economies have empowered "the *mukhabarat* state with its military and police apparatuses. It continues to be able to reproduce itself and perfect its coercive capacity." [63] Only a successful transition to a democratic system of rule involving, at minimum, application of Dahl's dual polyarchical requirements of public contestation and the right to participate [64] can overcome the current condition of political stasis, economic stagnation, social atrophy, and cultural discontinuity.

Yet the one social class capable of animating civil society in its challenge to the authoritarian state remains remarkably indifferent if not hostile to pluralistic politics. Moore's dictum of "no bourgeoisie, no democracy" [65] seems not to have taken hold in the Maghreb where the professional middle class functions, at best, as "contingent democrats" [66] or "reluctant democrats." [67] The potentially powerful and influential business communities in each of the three countries seem to want "money even more than they want political participation. If they can find nondemocratic ways to protect economic interests, they can live with that. [In the final analysis,] businessmen, interested primarily in profit, are more concerned with a regime's effectiveness than with its openness: they want a state weak enough to loot but strong enough to be worth looting." [68]

The only social movements in Maghrebi countries insistent on democratic change, government accountability, the rule of law, transparency, and civilian authority are non-violent Islamist political parties. Rooted in civil society and representing mass-based interests, Islamists challenge state power directly both at the level of rhetoric and action. Since government accountability and the rule of law are central to the democratic project, Islamists are best positioned to promote substantive change. Yet no Arab regime in North Africa or the Middle East has ever permitted an Islamist movement to come to power through peaceful, democratic means save for a brief moment at the legislative level in Algeria from 1989 to early 1992.

The democratic imperative in North Africa needs no Islamic qualifier but Islamists are the most committed to the democratic project. As long as all actors play according to the democratic rules

of the game, then none should be excluded from participation. How else can political differences be resolved peacefully? Stepan makes this point clear:

Democracy is a system of conflict regulation that allows open competition over the values and goals that citizens want to advance. [A]s long as groups do not use violence, do not violate the rights of other citizens, and stay within the rules of the democratic game, *all* groups [including Islamists] are granted the right to advance their interests, both in civil society and in political society. This is the minimal institutional statement of what democratic politics does and does not entail.[69]

An institutional or procedural approach to democracy implies “that no group in civil society—including religious groups—can *a priori* be prohibited from forming a political party. Constraints on political parties may only be imposed *after* a party, by its actions, violates democratic principles.”[70] The “twin tolerations”—freedom for democratically elected governments and freedom for religious organizations in civil and political society—serve as the minimal definition of democracy.[71]

Radical politics seem the inevitable alternative both domestically and internationally when these “twin tolerations” are absent or systematically compromised by autocratic ruling elites. While theories of economic deprivation and psychological alienation play a role in explaining the radicalization of Islamic politics in North Africa and beyond, in its essence Muslims rebel in response to political oppression. This thesis is most forcefully and, I believe, most convincingly presented by Hafez when he writes:

Muslims become violently militant when they encounter exclusionary states that deny them meaningful access to political institutions and employ indiscriminate repressive policies against their citizens during periods of mass mobilization. Political exclusion and state repression unleash a dynamic of radicalization characterized by exclusive rebel organizations that isolate Islamists from their broader society and foster antisystem ideologies that frame the potentially healthy competition between secularism and Islamism as a mortal struggle between faith and impiety.[72]

Given the determinate role of the United States as a critical outside actor, can it provide support for the “twin tolerations” as a way of promoting institutionalized democracy and thereby reduce the impact of global terrorism?

The Role of the United States

In the face of continued state intransigence in the Maghreb, it seems unlikely that civil society, however animated and robust, can produce the necessary conditions for the establishment of a political society within which independent political parties can emerge serving as the institutional spearhead of a democratic transition. The international support variable has demonstrated the importance of external actors in shaping the style and direction of state behavior. In this regard, current U.S. objectives to bring democracy to the Arab world through the Broader Middle East Initiative is laudatory and logical. The Initiative’s underlying assumptions regarding the need to break the link between political authoritarianism, socioeconomic deprivation, cultural alienation, and terrorism by creating a democratic alternative are compelling and convincing.

Unfortunately, the situations in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, among others, have seriously undermined the credibility of such efforts in the minds of many Arabs.[73] More harmful has been the way in which North African leaders, with Ben Ali serving as prime example, have usurped the symbolism, rhetoric, and outward manifestations of democratic practices to serve authoritarian ends. As one analyst has correctly observed: “Insofar as survival strategies have increased the perceived costs of democratization while not providing for effective economic

development, [even liberal autocrats] have shown themselves unwilling or unable to cross anxious hard-liners in the military, the security forces, and the business community.”[74]

For its part the United States simply cannot stand by and allow its democratic efforts to fail if only because terrorism is so deeply embedded into the authoritarian impulse that can only be overcome through the democratic imperative. Given the region’s paucity of will and robust authoritarianism, there is not likely to be any substantive political changes in the Maghreb until the United States presses leaders like Ben Ali, Bouteflika, and Mohamed VI, all of whom have close personal and political ties to the current administration, “to transcend an involuted gradualism whose small steps trace the sad contours of an unvirtuous circle [of conflict, stalemate, reform, and conflict] rather than the hopeful lineaments of a real path forward.”[75]

As Brumberg has correctly pointed out, if a policy of substantive democratic change is to succeed, the United States must insist on the creation of effective and independent political parties, the institutionalization of truly representative legislative bodies, and the firm application of the rule of law. All this must also “be accompanied by vigorous international support for effective monitoring of local and national elections.”[76]

In the absence of such efforts there is no reason to believe that the Maghreb’s robust authoritarianism will dissolve anytime soon. Sadly, therefore, the conclusion of someone who is otherwise a severe critic of America’s efforts to promote democracy in North Africa and the Middle East, will continue to be true. “The entire Arab world is blighted by a group of remarkably similar regimes that share several characteristics in common, notably their stagnant political systems and the ubiquitous, brutal efficiency of the means of repression that keep their respective oligarchies safely in power to siphon off and profit from their societies’ surplus.”[77]

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