

Looking at the deteriorating Human Rights situation in Morocco, we might ask: “What happened?”. What happened to the promising liberalization process of the late nineties early two thousand? That period was full of promises in terms of democratization, freedom of the press and human rights. Morocco had one of the most vibrant independent media in the region. Morocco passed some of the most progressive women status laws in the region. Morocco set up what was supposed to be the equivalent of a Truth commission to deal with the Human rights violation of what are commonly called the years of Lead. The first one in the region, it was called the Equity and Reconciliation commission. Today, there is no independent media to speak of and International NGO’s are denouncing the return of systemic torture. So, what happened?

For those who have been closely following what has been going on in Morocco, the writing was on the wall. The first major banning of newspapers happened in 2000. And in fact, don’t take my word for it, just go the Freedom House’s and Reporters Without Borders’ freedom of the press indicators, or the World Bank governance indicators and you will see something many will find surprising: Morocco’s Human rights and freedom of the Press performance “peaked” in the year 2000. These indices have either declined or at best stagnated since the early 2000s.

Then why the false perception? One reason for this is what we might call the curse of bad **neighborhood**. Morocco is constantly compared to what’s happening in the rest of the region. Despite its problems and for a long time, Morocco appeared much more, if not democratic, democratizing, and respectful of its citizen’s rights. This perception was somewhat changed by the Arab Spring after 2011. For one, another country, Tunisia, moved more decisively toward democratization than Morocco did. Morocco was not the torch bearer of political liberalization anymore.

But what about the much vaunted new constitution adopted in 2011?

Well first, the Moroccan regime adopted the new constitution under duress, so to speak. From the early 2000’s to 2011, the liberalization process initiated in the late 90’s has stalled. It is only because of the hundreds of thousands of Moroccans who demonstrated week after week during the Arab spring demanding democracy; and because the Moroccan power elites saw what happened to the seemingly unassailable Benali’s and Mubarak’s grip on power in Tunisia and Egypt that they consented to a constitutional reform, or an ersatz thereof. By July 2011, when the constitution was put to the vote a combination of factors had took the wind out of the sails of the democratization movement. Hence a constitution in which the authoritarian regime did not concede much.

Had the constitution lived up to its promising slogans, we would have seen tangible effects. We would have seen an independent judiciary, and independent press etc. None of this happened. And that means, to use an expression from the US founding fathers, that the Constitution proved to be a mere parchment guarantee, not a true democratic constitution.

To go back to the initial question, I think there are two main reasons to the current clamp down on independent voices in Morocco. The first is panic. The Moroccan regime is panicking because it has realized its failure to produce the kind of institutions that would ensure the social and economic stability to maintain political stability. The first major warning shot happened with the Moroccan version of the Arab Spring in 2011. The second one was the massive popular protests that took place in the Rif region in 2017.

Unwilling to allow the establishment of the right type of political institutions to promote economic development and equity, the Moroccan regimes decided to persecute those whose investigations and views might feed the discontent borne out of this failure.

The second reason for this wave of repression has to do with a sense of entitlement. The regime feels entitled to carry out these actions because it believes it earned impunity by being a guarantor of stability and peace. This function is certainly prized by certain sections of the Moroccan society, but also by its foreign allies, namely the United States.

Which brings me to the other, newer source of entitlement. It has been said that the US foreign policy establishment never misses an opportunity to extol the level of cooperation on security issues/terrorism and the relationship to Israel. These issues are seen by the Moroccans as their get out of jail card with the US government. The idea is that because we are fighting terrorism against and because we have normalized diplomatic relations with Israel despite an overwhelming majority of Moroccans being against it -An August 2020 poll showed that 88% of Moroccans were against normalization with Israel-, we expect the US to look away when the regime commits human rights violations. And this has been the case in recent years with the crackdown on journalists and human rights activists but also with the resurgence of systemic torture.

These dynamics sound familiar because it has been the logic of authoritarian powers of the region in the past, namely during the Cold War. The notion that countries furthering US interests in the region are given a free pass when it comes to human rights must be fought and it behooves us to remember how those dynamics played out in the cold War.

The lack of democracy has another nefarious consequence: Economic mismanagement, predation and rentierism. Because of the absence of democratic institutions public investment was directed toward flashy projects with dubious economic impact. Billions went to high-speed trains while the education system was in shambles. Morocco is the country in the region with the highest proportion of youth willing to leave the country worse than war torn countries such as Yemen.

Urban youth development unemployment, a sure predictor of social unrest, is more than 40%.

The ruling elites are using their total control on State institutions to carve themselves dominant positions in the major sectors of the economy. Morocco's ruling family controls the biggest bank, the biggest insurance company, the energy production sector, the biggest private education company, one of the three telecom

companies of the country among other sectors. This tight grip on the economy by non-accountable players edges out the true entrepreneurs and risk takers. In sum, those who create wealth and jobs. A sine qua non condition for long lasting stability.

Let me conclude with a sad and ironic story. Omar Radi, a young brilliant investigative journalist was sentenced to 6 years in jail for, among other alleged crimes, espionage. The Moroccan state claimed that Omar had acted as a spy when worked as a consultant with a London based company specialized in country risk analysis and catering to the demands of international investors. Few weeks ago, the investment project Omar consulted for, went through. Thanks in part to his work, Close to dozens of millions of dollars were invested in the Moroccan agricultural sector.

The US government should help its ally to democratize and make sure that it is not free riding US strategic interest to repress its citizens.