

Middle East / North Africa

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In 1999 two young Arab kings succeeded their fathers to the throne: King Hussein of Jordan had reigned for 46 years and King Hassan of Morocco for 38 years, when their eldest sons, Abdullah and Mohammed (both born in the first half of the 60s) succeeded them. The new kings have a European education and distinctly westernized behaviour. It is for this reason that many observers were expecting a legitimacy crisis. But thus far, the two monarchs seem to propose a different conception of political order which has gained widespread support: they are regarded as the new heralds of Moroccan and Jordanian youth. The support of the youth is one of the major challenges in societies where more than half of the population is under 25 years of age.

The new kings of Morocco and Jordan both benefit on the national level from the inherited royal legitimation, on the international level from the support of the Clinton-administration and on the personal level from an effort to introduce a new concept of authority. The rumour that King Abdullah went around the country in disguise talking to people in a government hospital or in the bureaucracy in order to avoid being isolated from the complaints of the masses is not unsubstantiated. Mohammed VI is called by teenagers 'M 6' or 'King of the Poor'. In 1987 he received his diploma in political science from the University of Rabat. Six years later he submitted his doctoral thesis at the Uni-



PHOTO: A. LINH

#### King Mohammed VI of Morocco

versity of Nice on the cooperation between the Maghreb and the European Union. Meanwhile he accompanied Jacques Delors, in his capacity as President of the European Commission, for eight months in order to learn EU diplomatic policy making. Contrary to many comments after the death of his father, Mohammed VI was prepared to succeed him but did not play an important public role within the court ceremony nor had he voiced any political opinions prior. What was formally known as the 'reign of hiba' (fear) is now being transplanted by a wave of trust.

#### New values or better public relations?

It is too early to evaluate the sustainability of the introduction of new norms and values and the direct influence of this discourse on

# Transformation through Monarchy in Morocco and Jordan

*Realpolitik.* It was, without a doubt, a courageous act when Mohammed VI ousted long-term Minister of Interior, Driss Basri, after 25 years. This event supports the hypothesis that the more humble behaviour of the heads of states and a new etiquette at the royal palaces is not merely a masquerade or political tactics. Further research is necessary, however, to analyse the effectiveness of the changing images of Mohammed VI and Abdullah II in order to assess their influence on the collective cultural identity.

One important historical study on Morocco has been presented by Abdellah Hammoudi, who has examined 'the exact ways in which these abstract principles of legitimation are vested with an emotional impact sufficient to foster action' (Hammoudi 1997: 2). The author looked at the ideological and cultural foundations of the persistent authoritarianism from an anthropological point of view. From a political science approach, new questions arise in order to explore whether and how the images of both kings foster legitimacy among the youth. It needs to be assessed whether and how Mohammed VI can still be the sacred commander of the faithful and at the same time break through the authoritarian style of rule. The recent web chats among Moroccans that have appeared – with the anonymity of the Internet – containing questions about the possibility that a descendant of the Prophet be gay, show the sensitivity of this debate.

#### Hassan II: the last king of divine right in Morocco?

The relationship between the Moroccan king and his subjects is one of direct allegiance. The televised ceremony of allegiance, performed every year on March 3, equals the submission of the whole population in one instant. The monarchy becomes the one point of reference for the vast majority of Moroccans. The opposition journalist Hamid Berrada pointed out that when the people mourned the loss of their father in July 1999 this was not a metaphor; they had been literally turned into orphans. The strength of the monarchy lies in its direct religious ties between the king-sultan-caliph and the subject-believer-citizen. '[A]ttacking him would be both a crime and a sacrilege – inseparable notions in this logic – at once a violation of divine law and the desecration of a figure of Islamic piety', notes Hammoudi (1997: 13). The identification with the leader is not only based on divine authority and sharifian descent, but also derived from the anti-colonial stance of the monarchy. Due to Moroccan colonial history, identification with the regime is much greater than in any other Arab country.

#### What constitutes legitimacy?

The point of departure here is the assumption that religious conceptions of order and legitimacy do not only have a dogmatic dimension but are also part of a changing social praxis. Legitimacy is not understood as an inherent characteristic of monarchical rule as such, but as the result of a process of bargaining and counterbalanc-

ing. The Alawite dynasty that has ruled Morocco since the 17<sup>th</sup> century has relied on very flexible conceptions of order and legitimacy, which partly explains their continuous and stable rule. The Makhzen's (literally 'storehouse' – centre of power, state) strategy to counterbalance urban and tribal society, Arab and Berber, and reformers and the orthodoxy, has a long successful history in Morocco.

The sacralization of the monarchy in the post-colonial constitution of 1962 (Art. 23) can be seen as one example of the (re-)construction of religiously founded conceptions of political legitimacy in contemporary Morocco. The constitution, originally a secular instrument, now establishes the sacredness of the person of the king – an idea completely alien to classical Islamic law. Hereditary monarchy is another concept that is highly controversial among Muslim scholars. Even the ceremony of the *bay'a* (oath of allegiance to the sultan/king) does not mean a return to Muslim traditions, but is very much a backward production. Today high officials from the Ministry of Interior and members of parliament are swearing allegiance – and the ulema as well. The combination of traditional form with modern content is supposed to constitute historical continuity and therefore legitimacy.

#### A new challenge for Islamist opposition groups

Whereas their fathers had been proponents of an authoritarian cultural symbolism, their young successors depict themselves as citizens among citizens. The mosque of Hassan II in Casablanca is an architectural manifestation of the former tradition-bound authority (see *ISIM Newsletter* 3/99). In Morocco, streets and public buildings are either named after Hassan II or Mohammed V but never after ordinary citizens. Mohammed VI is still considered to be a direct successor of the prophet in the 36<sup>th</sup> generation. This line of legitimation is not being erased now, but is mixed with elements of modern popular culture.

The young king's new semiology represents a cultural re-evaluation in the Middle East. It is being debated whether the obvious metamorphosis of the holy will end in a position of the king comparable to the Spanish monarch after Franco. Or is Mohammed VI just trying to secure the position of the crown above the constitution by applying a modern outlook?

In both cases, the new symbolism means a different challenge for the Islamist opposition than the types of regime with which they were formerly confronted. So far they had presented themselves as the 'voice of the poor'. Faced with a choice, many young people now prefer the cosmopolitan outlook of their young leader to the inward looking worldview of the Islamists who demand not to listen to music or to separate the sexes.

The importance and profundity of certain actions can best be deciphered by the reactions they call forth: In November 1999, Abdessalam Yassine, the leader of the most important Moroccan Islamist group *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* (Justice and Welfare) wrote a remarkable letter addressing Mohammed VI. Yassine depicts the young monarch as highly ad-

mired by Moroccan youth. '[They] regard him as a friend, a symbol of liberation and a promise for a better future. During the first weeks of his reign, and wherever his inaugural campaign took him, the young king is greeted with genuine and youthful enthusiasm. The Makhzen machinery, which organised the funeral of the late Hassan II, plays a full role to present to the crowd, overcome with cheers, a young man having great presence, smiling and gesturing benevolently to the warm welcome of the public.'\*

Despite Yassine's proposal to repatriate the royal family's fortune in order to reduce Morocco's foreign debt, poverty and the unemployment rate – a proposal considered offensive by the king and therefore censured – Yassine in his letter does not suggest that Mohammed VI is not to be trusted or that his mission has already failed. 'In this beginning of November 1999, the young king has won the first round in his glorious battle against "l'empire du mal". He has dismissed the central pillar of the Makhzen. Hassan's odd-job man. Hassan's right-hand man. Public enemy 2... In his speeches, the new king talks about a "new concept of authority". He has brilliantly proven that he intends to act accordingly. However, does he really intend to break off with the past? Can he do so? When is the great revolution to take place?' (Yassine: 1999)

The old generation of leaders in the Middle East chose to counter the growing tide of Islamism with more and more public space for a paternalistic interpretation of what were deemed to be Muslim traditions and practices. With the death of Hassan II, many observers doubted whether Mohammed VI would acquire the spiritual authority as commander of the faithful and the theological authority as highest religious scholar that would guarantee him the support of the ulema. Now it seems that this might not even be his strongest asset against the Islamist opposition. It will be of interest for the whole Arab world to see which notions of legitimacy and type of power will be put forward in a society which is heavily struck by a crisis of religious and political meaning. ♦

#### Note

\* Yassine explained that he had originally written the Memorandum in French in order to reach Morocco's westernized French-speaking elite who regard Arabic as a "vernacular" language used only to communicate with illiterate people.'

#### References

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