Red Lines: Legitimation and Dissent in Contemporary Morocco

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To the Moroccan activists and citizens without whose generosity and bravery this work would not have been possible

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List of Abbreviations[1]

AMDH	Moroccan Association of Human Rights
CCDH	Advisory Council for Human Rights
CNDH	National Association of Human Rights
CSO	civil society organization
IER	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
IRCAM	Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture
JCA	Justice and Charity Association
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
PAM	Party of Authenticity and Modernity
PI	Independence Party
PJD	Party of Justice and Development
PPS	Party of Progress and Socialism
PSU	Unified Socialist Party
RNI	Rally of National Independents
UNFP	National Union of Popular Forces
USFP	Socialist Union of Popular Forces

[1] The full names of are provided in English, however most abbreviations appear in their French equivalent, as these are most commonly used in other English-language texts about Morocco.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Red lines and taboos abound in everyday life, inflecting and constraining what we say, who we say it to, and how we say it. While these discursive *faux pas* structure everyday interactions across social and political contexts, perhaps nowhere are they more numerous—and the consequences of transgressing them more severe—than under non-democratic forms of rule. Indeed, laws and norms that curtail free expression, and especially criticism directed at autocrats themselves, are a common feature of all autocracies.[1] For example, in the world's remaining absolute monarchies (and, controversially, even in some constitutional monarchies), *lèse-majesté* laws impose strict punishments on anyone who 'offends' members of the royal family, while in other varieties of non-democracy similar laws and norms militate against political criticism and carry similarly harsh punishments for transgressors. Alongside proscribed speech in autocracies, however, there is often also *pre*scribed speech—that is, official claims and narratives promulgated by the regime that extol its virtues, project its values, or otherwise justify its rule. These justifications—or legitimation claims—operate in tandem with red lines and taboos to shape patterns of quiescence and dissent in everyday discourse under authoritarian rule.

Authoritarian elites thus attach great importance to maintaining what Jim Scott calls "hegemonic appearances," or the "public show of unanimity" (1990, 204) in

[1] I use authoritarian regime, dictatorship, and autocracy interchangeably throughout this paper to describe all forms of non-democracy.

everyday discourse—to keeping *pro*scribed speech private and isolated, and *pre*scribed speech public and widespread. Backed by the might and reach of the authoritarian state's coercive apparatus, norms and laws governing political speech encourage the reproduction of legitimation claims, spurring preference falsification and generating evidence of a regime's popularity or acceptability among others. Alongside co-optation and redistribution, these strategies collectively help produce the "smooth surface of apparent consent" (*ibid*) that is the hallmark of public life in most authoritarian regimes. Dictators, in other words, repress, co-opt, and legitimate their rule in order to maintain power and ensure regime reproduction. While these three strategies—what the literature sometimes refers to as the "three pillars of stability" (Gerschewski 2013)—never extinguish dissent, when effective they help keep it "offstage" (Scott 1990), or otherwise camouflaged through acts of "everyday resistance" (Scott 1985).

Yet balancing between repression, co-optation, and legitimation to ensure quiescence and regime reproduction is an ongoing process, and authoritarian elites are often compelled to change how they balance among these three strategies—increasing repression or co-opting new oppositional actors[2] in response to protest, for example. Regimes are made to adjust their reproduction strategies in part because dissent never disappears, and the perceptions of ordinary citizens—so crucial to the operation of preference falsification and self-censorship—are malleable. Indeed, as contemporary theories of protest and revolution highlight, if the right number or kind of actors succeed in disrupting the reproduction of norms of appropriate speech—by challenging official

[2] By "oppositional actors," I mean both individuals, like activists, protest leaders, and independent journalists, as well as organizations, like political parties, unions, and NGOs. I use the term "oppositional" rather than "opposition" intentionally to clarify I am referring to a broader set of actors beyond simply opposition parties in parliament.

narratives or repudiating legitimation claims, for example—it can trigger a cascade effect: preference falsification breaks down, "offstage" speech enters the public discourse, and broad-based protests emerge, which can, in exceptional cases, escalate into outright rebellion and revolution (Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994). To be sure, in most instances, regimes respond to such developments with harsh crackdowns that effectively quash incipient rebellions. But repression isn't always successful or cost-free, as the dramatic collapse of the USSR in 1991 illustrates, or the more recent fall of Tunisian and Egyptian dictators during the 2011 Middle East and North African (MENA) uprisings. Others might respond with conciliatory gestures and reforms that lead to greater co-optation and redistribution. Yet these, too, sometimes prove ineffective and engender backlash when reforms fail to meet expectations (Finkel, Gehlbach, and Olsen 2015). In sum, authoritarian elites balance between repression, co-optation, and legitimation to maintain quiescence and ensure regime reproduction, but ordinary citizens interpret and respond to these three practices, sometimes compelling elites to change how they balance among them. And in some, albeit exceptional, instances rebalancing is unsuccessful, protests escalate into rebellion, and regimes collapse.

However, the interaction between elite strategy and mass reception is an ongoing feature of life under authoritarianism, and authoritarian elites are often made to readjust their strategies for maintaining power even absent open rebellion. Put otherwise, between exceptional moments of revolutionary upheaval and the quotidian ubiquity of disguised resistance lies significant variation in the forms of protest and dissent to which dictators are often compelled to respond. For example, following a years-long campaign of protests, sit-ins, and petitions by domestic and international human rights activists in the

1980s and 90s, former Moroccan King Hassan II adopted a more conciliatory posture, freeing political prisoners, loosening some restrictions on political speech, and incorporating former activists into a new national human rights body. Similar shifts in strategy toward greater redistribution and incorporation of oppositional voices have occurred episodically in Jordan (Schwedler 2006). At the other end of the spectrum, the Bahraini monarchy responded to large, but peaceful, protests during the 2011 uprisings with brutal repression, a strategy it has maintained in the years since as it clamps down on dissent while deliberately fueling sectarian divides (Matthiesen 2013). Mass contention that exceeds everyday resistance but stops short of open rebellion can thus trigger important changes in the strategies elites use to maintain power, and how ordinary citizens, in turn, adapt.

The authoritarianism literature, however, has largely neglected these changes, focusing instead on those moments of exception when reproduction strategies break down, rebalancing is unsuccessful, and the regime falls. Yet by narrowly focusing on regime collapse, and conflating the absence of collapse with stability, we leave unexamined important changes in elite strategy and how ordinary citizens respond to these changes—and with it, much of the contingency and texture of protest, dissent, and authoritarian politics more broadly. A regime may come to rely more heavily on repression, for example, and still not collapse; but it is likely to be a different kind of regime than one that emphasizes legitimation or co-optation—the difference between a regime that uses rubber bullets, for example, and real ones. These differences matter for the texture of life under authoritarianism, for how ordinary people make sense of politics, organize collectively, and express dissent. By studying the *process* of interaction between

authoritarian elite strategy and mass reception—instead of focusing on one possible *outcome* this process can produce, regime change—we gain a richer, and more accurate, view of authoritarian politics.

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This project explores the interaction between authoritarian reproduction strategies and citizen perceptions in the context of contemporary Morocco. Specifically, this project explores the transformation of the Moroccan monarchy under King Mohammed VI and changes in how the monarchy balances co-optation and repression with its public justification for rule, or legitimation claim—namely, that the king serves as a neutral arbiter above, and apart from, petty politics and self-interest. In what follows, I will connect these changes in reproduction strategy to changing patterns of mass contestation and protest in the kingdom. While at the outset of his reign in 1999 the young monarch served as a locus of hope and unity for many Moroccans, he has become the target of unprecedented criticism and ridicule in recent years, particularly following the 2011 MENA uprisings and the modest, yet largely superficial, reforms he championed in response. In the process, the institution of the monarchy has also been transformed: from an omnipotent, feared, and mysterious authority to an overextended, exposed, and increasingly questioned one. Indeed, while direct criticism of the monarchy, let alone ridicule, has long been understood as an unambiguous red line in Morocco (Smith and Loudiy 2005), I will show that respect for this norm has eroded dramatically in recent

years as many ordinary Moroccans not only criticize the king, but increasingly challenge and repudiate his public justification for rule.

The Moroccan regime is, of course, not without power: it wields a sophisticated, far-reaching repressive apparatus that surveils, defames, and sidelines critics with impunity. And in recent years, as direct criticism of the king has increased, the regime has been compelled to lean more heavily on this coercive apparatus. I thus do not argue in what follows that the Moroccan monarchy's collapse is imminent or inevitable. But I do illustrate that the strategy the regime has long relied on to ensure its reproduction—balancing co-optation and repression with the need to maintain the monarchy's legitimacy or *hiba*—no longer keeps public criticism and norm-defiance at bay. And as the regime compensates with the mostly coercive tools it has remaining, it is incurring costs—costs in the form of protests, which must be discredited, placated, or if necessary, repressed; increasingly outspoken popular culture content, which must be condemned and its creators punished; and growing criticism in everyday discourse among ordinary people, which must be discouraged with appeals to nationalism and rituals that reaffirm the monarchy's special role—and failing that, with repression and fear to compel self-censorship and preference falsification.

In brief, the Moroccan monarchy is overextended and under fire. Though the breakdown of its reproduction strategies need not portend its collapse, however, the ensuing changes have nonetheless dramatically altered the landscape of contemporary Moroccan politics, upsetting the tentative elite consensus that emerged in the latter years of Hassan II and spurring new, and unprecedented, forms of dissent. Collectively, these developments have begun to "pierce the smooth surface of apparent consent" (Scott

1990, 204)—to chip away at the image of a powerful but benevolent and apolitical king who guarantees stability—and have subsequently compelled a shift in authoritarian elite strategy toward greater repression. In this project I thus foreground the voices and changing perceptions of ordinary Moroccans and place them alongside the elites who try to manage, and contain, their growing norm defiance. In this sense, this project serves as a reminder that authoritarian elite strategy is not formed in vacuum and is always at least somewhat constrained by the perceptions and behaviors of ordinary people.

The question that remains, and that this dissertation centers, is *why* the perceptions and behaviors of ordinary people have changed—*why* ordinary Moroccans have grown more willing to criticize the monarchy openly and directly. I have already detailed how vulnerable the apparent quiescence that marks much of public life under authoritarianism is to changing citizen perceptions, which can disrupt processes of preference falsification and self-censorship that generate evidence of a regime's popularity. And I've also previewed how changing perceptions, and the subsequent rise of norm-defying discourse, can compel authoritarian elites to rebalance their reproduction strategies—in the Moroccan case, toward greater repression. But what drives these changing perceptions in the first place?

In this project, I trace changing perceptions of the king's performance and increasing criticism of his rule to the very strategies the Moroccan monarchy relies on to ensure its reproduction. Specifically, I argue that decades of palace-orchestrated co-optation have weakened the resonance of the monarchy's legitimation claim and provided an opening for regime opponents to launch critiques. While the Moroccan monarchy has never served as an apolitical arbiter, it has long used selective co-optation to reinforce

perceptions of this legitimation claim's accuracy, pitting rival factions against one another and blaming them for the kingdom's political problems. However, over the past two decades, in order to maintain this process of co-optation and blame deflection, the monarchy has been compelled to pursue the incorporation of a broader array of actors. I argue that, over time, the sidelining of oppositional voices through co-optation has exposed the monarchy's political machinations, making it vulnerable to open criticism. In turn, with limited recourse to legitimation and co-optation, the regime has fallen back on repression to quell dissent and maintain power. In short, this project demonstrates that co-optation and legitimation cannot be taken as exogenous to one another, and that regime reproduction strategies can break down endogenously over time—and thus not only due to exogenous shocks like economic crises as often assumed (e.g. Geddes 1999, Brancati 2014).

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I first briefly summarize the resurgent comparative authoritarianism literature and its focus on co-optation, repression, and legitimation before then identifying key theoretical gaps, especially regarding legitimation. Then, I preview the project's main theoretical argument, illustrating how co-optation can undermine legitimation, provide an opening for dissent to emerge, and compel elites to shift toward greater repression. Next, I detail the primarily interpretive, ethnographic, and comparative-historical methodologies that inform this project, before finally offering a chapter-by-chapter preview of the rest of the dissertation.

1. The Three Pillars of Stability in the Comparative Authoritarianism Literature

Since the early 2000s, the study of comparative authoritarianism has experienced a renaissance, motivated in part by the desire to explain the stubborn persistence of numerous forms of non-democratic rule globally into the 21st century. The world of authoritarian politics is both opaque and heterogeneous, in part because authoritarianism is a "residual category" that encompasses all forms of non-democratic rule (Svolik 2012, 20). Despite this diversity, over the past two decades scholars have developed myriad typologies to distinguish among subtypes of authoritarianism and their distinct internal logics, beginning with Geddes' (2003) pioneering study of autocratic breakdown and survival. Many ambitious analyses followed, identifying the regime types most prone to collapse and elaborating the mechanisms that link nominally democratic institutions like elections, parties, and legislatures to stability (e.g., Svolik 2012; Blaydes 2011; Levitsky and Way 2010; Magaloni 2008; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Largely rationalist in orientation, these early studies take as their premise that dictators are information-poor and unable to credibly commit, and that the primary threat to their stability is other elites. The principal challenge dictators thus face is guarding against the "elite threat" by balancing coercion with elite power-sharing institutions like elections, parties, and legislatures that enable dictators and fellow elites to overcome credible commitment problems. How dictators navigate this trade-off between repression and elite co-optation helps determine their survival in the long run.

While this earlier literature was a helpful corrective to teleological arguments about the inevitability of democratization and pushed scholars to take authoritarian durability seriously, its nearly exclusive focus on elite co-optation and, to a lesser extent, repression, left much about politics under authoritarianism unexamined. In recent years,

however, scholars have increasingly recognized that dictators need more than just the support of fellow elites, and must do more than co-opt and repress to survive; they must also justify their rule to ordinary citizens and secure their passive acquiescence, if not active support. Indeed, and as discussed at the outset of this chapter, autocrats invest significant resources in constructing and disseminating justificatory claims[3] that portray their rule as just and appropriate, while also policing discursive red lines that threaten these claims. Recognizing this, academics led by Johannes Gerschewski (2013) have introduced the concept of "legitimation" to the study of authoritarianism, defining it as the process of gaining "active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (18).[4] Legitimation is thus like a public justification or defense for rule—because of *X*, the regime has a right or is best suited to rule.

Legitimation is closely related to the concept of legitimacy, which, in its classic Weberian formulation, is a relational concept about power and compliance that turns on recognition: a relationship between a superior A and an inferior B is considered legitimate when B complies with A because B voluntarily accepts A's authority and right to rule (Weber 2013). Scholars have since refined Weber's conceptualization of legitimacy, and today it is the definition first proposed by Lipset in 1960 that most political scientists adopt: "Legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate

[3] I will use "legitimation claim," "justificatory claim," and "public justification for rule" interchangeably throughout this text.

[4] In the next chapter, I point out that this definition of legitimation makes it difficult to distinguish legitimation from co-optation and repression, and obscures what kind of action or practice legitimation is—that is, what legitimation *looks like*. I then use this as a springboard for developing an alternative framework for studying legitimation as "standards of public performance."

ones for the society" (77). Yet while legitimacy figured prominently in early political science work, it was largely abandoned during the rationalist turn of the 80s and 90s, dismissed as epiphenomenal or too vague to measure (Marquez 2016). Convincing ordinary citizens of a regime's virtues and appropriateness, scholars argued, was not necessary for that regime to nonetheless survive. Regime reproduction, in other words, didn't depend on legitimacy beliefs, and thus explanations for regime breakdown that pointed to loss of legitimacy were insufficient.

Gerschewski tackles this conundrum by arguing that we focus on legitimation, and not legitimacy, and treat it as an authoritarian reproduction strategy alongside co-optation and repression. These three strategies or "pillars," he argues, collectively help authoritarian regimes endure—but not necessarily convince their populations their rule is just or "most appropriate." In other words, the reason autocracies advance legitimation claims is not necessarily because they are then internalized and *naturalize* compliance, but rather because they *create incentives* for public compliance behavior—they help perpetuate public preference falsification and self-censorship (Marquez 2016, 31). Thus, whereas legitimacy refers to a property of a political system and carries normative connotations, legitimation is an action or a strategy undertaken by a regime in order to ensure its reproduction. Whether legitimation ultimately yields legitimacy beliefs is an "empirical question" (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017, 253)—and for the purposes of studying *regime reproduction*, it is not the most important question.

Gerschewski further distinguishes between what he terms "specific" and "diffuse" forms of legitimation, or what might be better labeled performance and ideological legitimation: the former relates to short-term evaluations of regime performance and

efficacy, whereas the latter is more long-term in orientation and relates to "what the regime 'actually is or represents'" (2013, 20). In other words, a regime might attempt to justify its rule by disseminating evidence of its economic performance (Zhao 2009) or bureaucratic responsiveness (Truex 2017); alternatively, it might invoke a particular political ideology like communism or construct narratives that cast rulers as guardians of nationalist precepts (Greene and Robertson 2020). In sum, legitimation or justificatory claims are an important part of official narratives and propaganda in authoritarian regimes, and they represent the non-coercive, non-redistributive counterpart to the other two authoritarian reproduction strategies.

2. Gaps in the Legitimation and Stability Literature

Legitimation helpfully turns our attention away from an exclusive focus on elites and mechanisms of credible commitment and toward ordinary citizens, perceptions, and their role in the broader processes of authoritarian reproduction. Yet as a concept it remains undertheorized, and in empirical applications much of the dynamism and contingency inherent in the interpretation and reproduction of legitimation claims and official discourse more broadly is stripped away. Indeed, legitimation claims and their positive impact on public compliance behavior are often taken to be self-evident. High economic growth or effective bureaucracies, for example, "legitimate" regimes and help them endure, whereas economic stagnation or bureaucratic dysfunction presumably do not—and possibly lead to dissent and protest. If a regime's economy performs well, for example, it can expect its justificatory claims touting economic performance to resonate and contribute to its reproduction; should there be a significant downturn, presumably

such claims would no longer resonate and elites would rebalance toward greater co-optation or repression, or otherwise retool legitimation strategies to emphasize other aspects of their rule. Similarly, if a regime defeats a military rival or terrorist group, for example, then official rhetoric extolling the leader as a nationalist hero and defender of stability would likely resonate; if that same leader were defeated, such rhetoric would not resonate and elites would need to compensate. In brief, then, legitimation claims are often assumed to be grounded in reality and 'work' by default.[5]

Yet as recent work on the impact of legitimation in China and Russia illustrates, not only are individuals' perceptions important for determining how legitimation claims impact compliance behavior—and thus regime reproduction strategies—they are also malleable and subject to manipulation and change over time, even absent changes in objective circumstances.[6] Writing on China's management of environment-related complaints and dissent, Ding (2020) shows how state officials promote quiescence through legitimation by endeavoring to create a *perception* of efficacy or performance among citizens, despite not delivering substantive results—and in some cases actually making the problem worse. This suggests, as Ding argues, that "what constitutes good or

[5] Fenner makes a similar point in her monograph on co-optation, noting that, as deployed in much of the literature, the concept is presumed to work by default. She notes, "the central premise that has been abandoned in studies of repression—that it always supports regime stability—is alive and well in studies of co-optation. The idea of co-optation as a practice or process, vulnerable to destabilization and failure, is too often replaced by the idea of co-optation as outcome: the neutralization of threats against the regime" (2).

[6] The broader problem of the resonance or reception of reproduction strategies among ordinary citizens is acknowledged by Keremoğlu and Weidmann in a recent review article on digital surveillance, censorship, and propaganda under authoritarianism. They ask, "do efforts of information framing and manipulation, for instance, actually lead to increased perceptions of regime legitimacy among the public—and if so, does this in turn bolster authoritarian rule? Autocrats actively disseminate information in their favor, and while we know that propaganda may inhibit collective action (Huang, 2018), we do not know whether the recipients of these digital messages actually believe this information" (2020, 8). While whether recipients *believe* legitimating messages isn't as important as how it affects their public compliance behavior, Keremoğlu and Weidmann nonetheless are right to highlight the importance of citizens' contingent perceptions and interpretations of legitimation claims.

bad performance is ultimately a function of citizens' beliefs" and as a result, "any assumption that tangible improvement of citizens' lives automatically translates into political support is therefore flawed" (2020, 4-5).[7] Ding thus shows that legitimation claims that emphasize performance—like Chinese officials' claims to effective environmental stewardship—need not accurately reflect reality in order to resonate among ordinary people, foster public norm compliance, and contribute to a regime's reproduction.

Another recent study on Russian public opinion confirms Ding's central conclusions about the intersubjective nature of performance. Writing in the wake of Russia's unilateral annexation of Crimea in 2014, Greene and Robertson document a significant improvement in "people's evaluation of their social, political, and economic surroundings" and a dramatic increase in popularity for Russian leader Vladimir Putin, despite little objective change in their circumstances (2020, 1).[8] Greene and Robertson attribute this dramatic shift to the collective experience of the "Crimean moment" and a broader narrative of nationalist irredentism promoted by the regime during annexation (4). Folding the "Crimean moment" into its broader legitimation strategy, the Russian regime thus constructed a narrative that cast Putin as a hero and defender of Russian nationalism, bolstering his standing among the masses, and with it, their evaluations of his performance and efficacy as leader. Thus, like Ding's study on Chinese environmental stewardship, Greene and Robertson also document how perceptions of performance are malleable and subject to manipulation and change over time—though

[7] And similarly, any assumption that a qualitative deterioration in standards of living automatically produces dissent and public non-compliance is also flawed.
[8] For more on the apparent popularity of autocrats, see Gunitsky (2015, 45) and Guriev and Treisman (2020).

the particular nationalist claims Greene and Robertson explore are perhaps less central to Russian legitimation strategies than claims to responsive governance are to Chinese strategies.

While neither Ding nor Greene and Robertson argue so in these terms, their conclusions about the malleability of perceptions and the often-murky relationship between what regimes say and what regimes do, suggest that our current understanding of legitimation is static and incomplete. Rather than assuming that robust economic growth and official rhetoric touting economic performance, for example, automatically help elites maintain power and quell dissent, we should instead treat whether legitimation claims resonate among the masses as an empirical question. These two studies also suggest that there is no easy distinction between specific and diffuse forms of legitimation, or what I previously labeled performance and ideological legitimation. Claims about "what the regime 'actually is or represents'" (Gerschewski 2013, 20) exist alongside, and are interdependent with, claims about how the regime performs and delivers for its citizens —and perceptions about the accuracy of *both* kinds of claims are malleable and intersubjective. Ding and Greene and Robertson thus help return an element of contingency and interpretation to the study of legitimation—and to the study of authoritarianism more broadly—even if this wasn't their primary explanatory goal.

Yet there are many questions these two studies leave unanswered: why and how did environmental issues in China and irredentist claims in Russia gain such salience in the first place, and why did performative environmental stewardship and the military annexation of Crimea prove effective in bolstering citizen perceptions of autocratic performance? And just as importantly, under what circumstances might legitimation

claims—like those that tout good environmental governance or a ruler's nationalist credentials—fail to resonate, and how might this impact patterns of dissent and protest? Is there a limit, in other words, to appearances and bravado, a limit beyond which legitimation claims cease to help elites maintain power and quiescence?

These questions, to be sure, are beyond the scope of the analyses examined here, but they form the heart of this project. Specifically, this project examines the production, interpretation, and breakdown of authoritarian legitimation claims, and how these processes impact the other reproduction strategies authoritarian elites devise to maintain power and quiescence. Thus this project asks, given the malleability of perceptions of performance, when do regime efforts to advance their legitimation claims fail to resonate, and with what effects on co-optation and repression? In what follows, I begin to address these questions while previewing my main theoretical argument.

3. The Argument

I begin by taking seriously the causal role of discourse in shaping everyday quiescence and dissent under authoritarian rule. I argue that all autocrats narrate and justify their rule with legitimation claims, but they do so under the scrutiny of ordinary citizens who can impose costs when incumbents are perceived to run afoul of these legitimation claims. I also argue that these legitimation claims are often the result of political settlement—the contingent product of historical struggle between rulers, their rivals, and the masses. In contemporary, postcolonial Morocco, the '*alawi* monarchy's primary justification for rule is *not* religious, as often claimed (e.g., Hammoudi 1997), but rather political and rooted in the idea of the king as neutral arbiter who presides above

the political fray and guarantees stability (Waterbury 1970; Herb 1999).[9] While the monarchy's origins date back to the 17th century, it was only during the struggle for independence from French and Spanish colonizers that this justificatory claim took shape and the monarchy successfully translated its symbolic capital into a claim to political primacy. Indeed, while initially nationalists saw in the king a potent symbolic weapon in their fight against colonization and championed him as a nationalist hero, in the years following independence in 1956 they fought bitterly against the monarchy's attempts to monopolize political control. Importantly, many oppositional figures never rejected the monarchy or its core legitimation claim, but rather fought over its interpretation and implications—a struggle that, despite being settled in the monarchy's favor, remains ongoing to this day. In brief, then, the Moroccan monarchy's contemporary political power, and its core justification for this power, are the contingent result of historical struggle. This struggle continues today, as the monarchy's primary legitimation claim is increasingly met with skepticism, ordinary Moroccans grow less reticent about defying discursive red lines, and regime elites shift their emphasis toward repression.

To help capture these dynamics, I draw on Jim Scott's (1990) work on the justification and reproduction of systems of domination to develop a new framework for studying legitimation claims that centers the role of ordinary citizens' perceptions. Specifically, I propose conceptualizing legitimation claims as public standards of ruling elite performance, standards which impose particular obligations on leaders and against

[9] To be clear, there are other legitimation claims associated with the Moroccan monarchy that *are* religious in nature—namely that the king of Morocco has a right to rule as both a descendent of the prophet and "commander of the faithful." In the postcolonial period, however, I argue that a separate, political justification has become more salient: that the king is a neutral arbiter who sits above and mediates among competing political factions. For more on this, see Chapter 3.

which ordinary citizens judge their behavior. When autocrats can effectively conceal behavior that contravenes their legitimation claims, they deprive opponents of discursive openings for launching critique. When concealment is ineffective, however, citizens can turn legitimation claims against incumbents. The resulting "rightful" critique (O'Brien 2006) poses a threat to autocrats as it can appeal to both regime opponents and supporters, triggering defiance and protest as previously silent opponents speak out and supporters grow disillusioned.

While the first part of this project shows that the reception of legitimation claims is contingent on autocrats' ability to conceal their hypocrisy from ordinary citizens, the second part identifies one mechanism through which hypocrisy can be revealed: co-optation. I argue that autocrats' attempts to sideline opponents through co-optation can harm citizen perceptions of autocratic performance and weaken the resonance of some legitimation claims over time. I substantiate this with evidence gathered over 16 months of fieldwork in Morocco, where the monarchy's long-standing claim to being an apolitical arbiter above and apart from politics has been increasingly challenged by ordinary Moroccans. Combining ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with comparative historical research and discourse analysis of popular media, I demonstrate that the breakdown of legitimation in Morocco has progressed in tandem with the increasing pace and scope of the monarchy's co-optation efforts.

Though the Moroccan monarchy has never served as an apolitical arbiter, it has long used selective co-optation to reinforce perceptions of this claim's accuracy, pitting rival factions against one another and blaming them for the kingdom's political problems. Former King Hassan II's decision in the late 1990s to pivot away from repression and

toward greater incorporation of oppositional actors, however, set this practice of selective co-optation on a new, more aggressive trajectory. In the decades since, in order to maintain this cycle of co-optation and blame deflection—which has become central to the regime's strategies for maintaining power and quiescence—the monarchy has been compelled to pursue the incorporation of a broader array of actors at an increasing pace. When protests reached Morocco during the 2011 MENA uprisings, King Mohammed VI thus responded predictably, promising to curb his political power through constitutional reforms and inviting for the first time the kingdom's leading Islamist party—and last remaining major opposition party yet to be co-opted—to form a government. Yet the monarchy's increasingly comprehensive co-optation, which over the past decades has come to envelop nearly all forms of organized opposition in the kingdom, has harmed its ritualized separation from ordinary citizens and politics, exposing its political machinations and straining beyond credulity the old adage, "the king is good, but those around him are bad" (Bennani-Chraïbi 2017). I argue these developments, aided by heightened levels of political engagement following the 2011 uprisings and expanding access to digital networking tools and alternative media sources, have sparked an unprecedented uptick in direct criticism of the king. Today ordinary Moroccans are increasingly unafraid to cross once-firm red lines, and limited critiques have begun to devolve into broader, and more salacious, criticism, rumor, and insult. In turn, with limited recourse to legitimation and co-optation, the regime has fallen back on repression to ensure its reproduction and quell dissent.

In brief, Mohammed VI's claim to being an apolitical arbiter has been undermined by the increasing exposure profligate co-optation has produced, which has

damaged the monarchy's ritualized separation from ordinary people and politics. As such, ordinary Moroccans increasingly criticize the king directly instead of the co-opted actors surrounding him who, rather than absorbing popular blame as intended, are instead seen as powerless and irrelevant, indistinguishable from the palace itself. In other words, the increasing scope of co-optation has undercut the Moroccan monarchy's core justification for rule.

This project makes a major theoretical contribution to the authoritarianism literature by showing that authoritarian regimes' reproduction strategies can break down endogenously over time, and not only because of exogenous shocks like economic downturns as some scholars have argued (e.g. Geddes 1999; Brancati 2014). Specifically, I show that co-optation cannot be taken as exogenous to legitimation, and that under certain conditions it can paradoxically encourage dissent, necessitating a shift toward greater repression. While these particular conclusions are directly applicable to other authoritarian monarchies that have ostensibly relinquished some executive authority like Jordan, the project engages with key questions about how autocrats balance among survival strategies relevant to scholars of authoritarianism, democratization, and protest everywhere. Finally, while the breakdown of reproduction strategies need not sound the death knell for an authoritarian regime, it does impose costs as elites readjust, whether by increasing co-optation and redistribution or, as in the Moroccan case, by ramping up repression.[10] Such readjustments not only risk further inflaming tensions and backlash;

[10] Indeed, intra-elite conflicts resulting in *coups d'état* are responsible for most instances of authoritarian regime change (Svolik 2012), not changing perceptions of regime performance among ordinary people and subsequent changes in patterns of mass dissent. I thus do not argue that ordinary citizens' perceptions and mass dissent are the primary drivers of regime change here — only that perceptions and dissent affect the strategies authoritarian elites devise and deploy to maintain power. However, there is reason to suspect that *coups* and mass dissent are often related as elites do not launch *coups* in a vacuum and their calculations about the probability of success are likely affected by mass behavior and their perceptions thereof. Put

they also change the texture of everyday political life and how ordinary people interpret their world, organize collectively, and express dissent.

4. Methods of Research and Case Selection

4.1 Interpretive and Ethnographic Methods, Causal Complexity, and Theory Development

This project examines discursive struggles over the process of authoritarian legitimation, how these struggles impact the dynamics of popular contention, and how authoritarian elites respond to changing patterns of dissent. While the argument is grounded empirically in contemporary Morocco, its theoretical conclusions bear on the dynamics of dissent and authoritarian reproduction more broadly. My analysis relies on interpretive and ethnographic methods which are particularly well-suited for studying the dynamic, interactive processes involved in the interpretation, reproduction, and breakdown of authoritarian legitimation processes. Indeed, subject to discursive struggle over the standards of public performance they impose on leaders, authoritarian legitimation is a fundamentally intersubjective process "co-constituted by a variety of subjects engaged in a thicket of multiple, overlapping forms of communication" (Schatz 2009, 15). Interpretive and ethnographic methods allow the researcher "to 'see' differently" and appreciate this complexity (*ibid*, 11). But despite foregrounding nuance, contingency, and complexity, interpretive approaches need not eschew causal claims-making (*ibid*), and indeed the core argument I advance here—that co-optation can

otherwise, if authoritarian elites are compelled to rebalance their reproduction strategies in response to rising mass dissent, this may also provide the occasion for coup-plotters to test their luck.

undermine the justificatory claims authoritarian leaders promulgate and trigger defiance of speech norms—is causal. Yet I do not make causal claims "based on the logic of statistical inference" as the "dynamic, unfolding processes" under study here are "ill-suited to that type of variable-oriented analysis" (Simmons 2018, 3-4). Instead, and like others who use interpretive methods to make causal claims, I treat culture—that is, language and symbols—as a set of "semiotic practices" (Wedeen 2002) which are "inscribed in activities that operate to produce observable political effects," including causal effects (Wedeen, 2009, 81-82). Thus in this project I show how the reproduction of official discourse contributes to observable political quiescence and norm adherence, but also how its breakdown can undermine quiescence and trigger changes in how authoritarian elites manage dissent. Both of these are causal claims, but they focus on observable changes in collective, meaning-making practices not readily translated into independent variables. Indeed, traditional survey-based research and quantitative text analysis are ill-suited to navigating the ambiguity, ambivalence, and polysemy inherent in how legitimation claims are interpreted, reproduced, and repudiated. In short, the justificatory claims autocrats promulgate, and the interpretation and reproduction of those claims by ordinary people, have observable, politically significant causal effects, and these are best captured through interpretive and ethnographic methods.

In addition to their utility in shedding light on dynamic and complex causal processes, interpretive and ethnographic approaches are also well-suited for theory development. Ethnography in particular gives researchers access to "insider perspectives, experiences, and meaning-making practices" (Parkinson 2013, 3) that can challenge prevailing theoretical assumptions, in addition to contributing by way of immersion to the

development of trust between researcher and interlocutor—something especially important in authoritarian contexts like Morocco and with sensitive topics like norm-defying discourse. Thus through long-term, ethnographic immersion, I was able to not only engage interlocutors in discussion of highly sensitive subject matter, but also in the process begin to question prevailing assumptions about authoritarian reproduction strategies and the role of official discourse and co-optation in buttressing them. It is this "abductive" quality of interpretive research—the constant back-and-forth interplay between puzzling empirical encounters and theoretical assumptions—that makes it such a powerful tool for theory development (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 27-40), and helps generate path-breaking, thoroughly contextualized arguments that remain attentive to the vagaries of meaning-making processes.

This project also engages in comparative-historical analysis as it traces the long-term evolution of the discursive struggle over the Moroccan monarchy's central justification for rule from the colonial period to today. This comparative-historical lens enables me to show broader, societal-level shifts in the discursive struggle over the monarchy's legitimation claim that predated the evidence collected through interviews and ethnography during my fieldwork from 2019 to 2020. In doing so, I am able to show how individuals are socially embedded and part of broader historical processes (Wedeen 2009, 81). Specifically, I am able to compare how my interlocutors make sense of the king's legitimation claim today with evidence from earlier historical contexts, helping me to identify a common, enduring narrative about the proper political role of the monarchy and the public standards of performance to which it is held. In other words, comparative-historical analysis helps to affirm that the monarchy's central justification for rule—to

being above the political fray—is not new, but that the discursive struggle over its meaning has entered a new phase characterized by increasingly vocal, public dissent.

4.2 Why Morocco?

Because this project is primarily concerned with developing a new theoretical lens for understanding authoritarian stability and legitimation in particular, it prioritizes internal over external validity. Indeed, it is through focused and thorough case studies that the "power and utility of local explanation in generating new theories" is best illustrated (Mahoney and Thelen 2015, 15). While the analysis I present in this dissertation can't be used to make precise predictions about when, for example, legitimation might break down in other contexts outside Morocco, by focusing on the *process* of interaction between ordinary citizens' perceptions and authoritarian reproduction strategies, the analysis nonetheless can help sensitize scholars to the quotidian dynamics that shape legitimation and authoritarian politics more generally.

Moreover, Morocco is not the only context where rulers' legitimation claims are subject to ongoing discursive struggle, nor is Morocco the only country where co-optation sometimes strains leaders' stated justifications for rule. For example, the framework I develop here applies directly to other monarchies that have ostensibly relinquished some of their executive authority, and where similar justificatory claims about the monarch as an apolitical arbiter are key, such as in Jordan. Yet even beyond monarchies like Jordan, this project offers insight for scholars seeking to understand how the justificatory claims authoritarian regimes promulgate might interact with the other so-called pillars of authoritarian stability and, over time, break down. In other words, while

this project seeks to explain contemporary developments in Moroccan politics, it does so while also developing a broader theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between public perceptions, authoritarian reproduction strategies, and popular contention in authoritarian regimes more broadly.

4.3 Sources of Evidence

My analysis is supported by extensive documentary and interview evidence gathered over the course of 16 consecutive months of immersive fieldwork in Morocco. In all, I have carried out semi-structured and open-ended interviews with over 70 activists, journalists, politicians, and academics, interviewing many of them more than once. These interviews were conducted without an interpreter present and largely in *darija*, the colloquial form of Arabic widely spoken in Morocco. Conducting research in the primary language of my interlocutors—and not, for example, Modern Standard Arabic or French, as is common with many researchers from the Global North—is especially important for a study primarily about discourse and dissent. While open-ended interviews are an important source of evidence, as an ethnography this project equally privileges the unplanned encounters, offhand remarks, and puzzling observations that fill the gaps between more formal research activities. Thus I bolster my extensive interview evidence with ethnographic observations of protests and meetings of activist organizations, as well as the myriad, quotidian interactions with Moroccan friends, acquaintances, and strangers that served to orient, and at times challenge, my emerging conclusions.

Beyond this, I complement my analysis with evidence from two other sources. First, I draw on analysis of everyday political discourse as captured in popular culture, focusing in particular on the lyrics of popular music and the content produced by leading social media commentators—actors whose growing popularity and reach make them integral for assessing rising dissent among ordinary Moroccans. Second, I incorporate textual analysis of publicly available elite discourse in key print publications, focusing on the interval between the late 1990s and today—a crucial period in the liberalization, and subsequent reversal, of print media in Morocco. This source material provides a valuable window onto the evolution of the regime's repression and co-optation strategies, as well as the contours of public dissent.

5. Plan of the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I begin outlining an alternative framework for studying the relationship between legitimation, ordinary citizens' perceptions, and the other two reproduction strategies authoritarian elites rely on to maintain power. This chapter thus provides the theoretical backbone for the empirical analysis that follows in the subsequent 4 chapters. Here, I outline those 4 chapters, which are organized chronologically around key inflection points in how the Moroccan monarchy manages its political opposition and quells popular dissent, from the early days of the postcolonial state to today.

In broad terms, Chapters 3 and 5 detail two different rounds or episodes of incorporation while Chapters 4 and 6 analyze subsequent episodes of popular protest and dissent (see Figure 1 below). Collectively, the chapters illustrate how successive rounds

of incorporation increased the monarchy's visibility, undermining its self-presentation as a neutral arbiter above petty politics and self-interest and inviting unprecedented direct criticism from ordinary citizens. A more detailed chapter-by-chapter summary follows, along with an historical timeline (see Figure 2) and causal map (see Figure 3).

Figure 1

Chapter 3 *1970s-2000s*	• Establishment of monarchy's contemporary legitimation strategy and the image of the king as neutral arbiter • First round of co-optation and liberalization followed by increasing restrictions
Chapter 4 *2011-2012*	• Popular protest forces regime to pivot back toward co-optation and liberalization • King largely spared from public criticism
Chapter 5 *2013-2016*	• Second round of co-optation and liberalization followed by increasing repression and restrictions • Most of Morocco's organized political interests now sidelined by co-optation
Chapter 6 *2017-Present*	• Popular protest, but co-optation and liberalization unavailable as strategy • King now target of direct public criticism • Sharp uptick in repression as a result

***

Chapter 3 begins by tracing the emergence of the Moroccan monarchy's contemporary legitimation strategy to the kingdom's struggle for independence from French and Spanish colonizers and the tumultuous years that followed. During this time period, the *'alawi* monarchy under Mohammed V successfully translated its symbolic capital into a claim to political primacy, outmaneuvering Moroccan nationalists who had

hoped to relegate the monarchy to a purely symbolic role in the postcolonial state. Over the coming decades and across 3 kings, as the monarchy sought to broaden its base of legitimacy, the relative centrality of religion in the regime's legitimation strategy would decrease, displaced by a growing emphasis on political pluralism and the nominally democratic institutions of parliament and semi-competitive elections. In the process, the palace began to cultivate an image as a neutral arbiter, above everyday politics and petty politicians. This culminated in former King Hassan II's decision in the late 1990s to pivot toward greater incorporation when he invited the long-time opposition parties of the *koutla dimoqratiyya* or "democratic bloc" (*koutla*) to form a government for the first time. Other oppositional actors, meanwhile, were incorporated through new state-run institutions and initiatives. After taking the throne in 1999, Mohammed VI deepened the process of liberalization, promising a "new concept of authority" to complement his image as an apolitical referee of the kingdom's political system. While the opposition-led government was short lived and promised reforms failed to materialize, the changes in popular expectations ushered in by this period set the stage for the protests and direct criticism of the king that would emerge in the decades that followed. The changes in how the regime managed its opposition, meanwhile, set the practice of incorporation on a new, more aggressive trajectory that would ultimately prove unsustainable.

Chapter 4 turns to the 2011 MENA uprisings, the monarchy's response to the protests, and their long-term impact on levels of political engagement among ordinary Moroccans. As protesters in what became known as the February 20th Movement singled out corrupt royal advisers and called for a "King who reigns but doesn't rule," Mohammed VI was compelled to once again promise further democratic reforms that

would finally put into practice what regime rhetoric had long maintained: that the monarchy was a neutral arbiter above petty politics and self-interest. While the king's swift promises of reform helped demobilize protesters and restore faith in this image, it would prove temporary—in part because of the changes in Moroccan society the protest movement helped catalyze. After witnessing the power of protest to extract concessions from the palace, many Moroccans lost their fear of political action and protest. Ordinary people began following political developments in the kingdom more closely, aided by digital networking tools that expanded access to information and narratives that countered official ones. The king's renewed promises of reform, meanwhile, increased their expectations. Collectively, these developments put the monarchy under a microscope and on the defensive—and closer to direct confrontation with ordinary Moroccans than it had ever been before.

Chapter 5 analyzes the impact of the 2011 protests on the monarchy's co-optation strategy. Put on the defensive by the protests and hoping to maintain his image as an apolitical arbiter committed to democratic reform, King Mohammed VI pivoted back toward incorporation in the years following the February 20th Movement. He invited the kingdom's last remaining opposition party, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD), to form a government while other oppositional actors were incorporated into palace-friendly parties and state-run bodies. Yet by reprising the strategy first pursued by his father in the late 1990s and doubling down on co-optation, Mohammed further hollowed out the ranks of oppositional actors in the kingdom, heightening his own visibility and putting his justification for rule in jeopardy. In the years following the February 20th Movement, then, years of increasingly comprehensive co-optation began

to catch up with the palace's legitimation strategy, eroding any meaningful distinction between the palace and the kingdom's other political forces. Combined with a more politically engaged and digitally connected citizenry, these moves left the monarchy highly visible and vulnerable to popular criticism.

In Chapter 6, I explain how decades of false promises and profligate co-optation reached an inflection point in the years following the 2011 protests and caused legitimation to break down. This chapter explores two factors in particular that enabled regime opponents to successfully unsettle "hegemonic appearances," disrupt preference falsification, and trigger an unprecedented wave of direct criticism of the king: (1) heightened levels of politicization and engagement in the wake of the 2011 protests; and (2) rapidly expanding access to the internet and digital networking technologies largely outside regime control. Though these factors gave opponents a platform and an audience, however, it was the increasing visibility of the monarchy's political machinations that provided the opening. Two developments in particular reveal how opponents capitalized on this opening. First, I examine the "Hirak Rif" protest movement, which erupted in late 2016 in the long-marginalized Rif region and triggered solidary protests nationwide. Leveraging the language of power, demonstrators called for the regime to honor its promises of development and reform while rejecting efforts by the monarchy to deflect blame. Indeed, when the king ordered a cabinet reshuffle and rebuked politicians for failing to implement promised reforms, protesters balked, calling instead for direct mediation by the king who they viewed as directly responsible. Second, I also examine the explosion in popularity of citizen journalists and YouTube commentators whose increasingly salacious critiques of the king surpassed the "legitimate" criticism of "Hirak

Rif" protesters, and spurred an explosion of norm-busting gossip, insult, and criticism directed toward the king in everyday discourse and popular media. Facing an unprecedented, rising tide of both "legitimate" and increasingly salacious criticism from ordinary Moroccans—and with little recourse to co-optation or legitimation—the monarchy was compelled to fall back on repression.

In Chapter 7, the conclusion, I summarize this project's main arguments and its contributions to the literature on authoritarianism and Moroccan historiography more broadly. The conclusion also briefly assesses the portability of my main arguments by exploring other empirical cases where legitimation and co-optation may work at cross purposes. Indeed, while this project seeks to explain contemporary developments in Moroccan politics, it does so while also developing a broader theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between public perceptions, authoritarian reproduction strategies, and popular contention in authoritarian regimes more broadly. I conclude by examining the normative implications of the project.

Figure 2

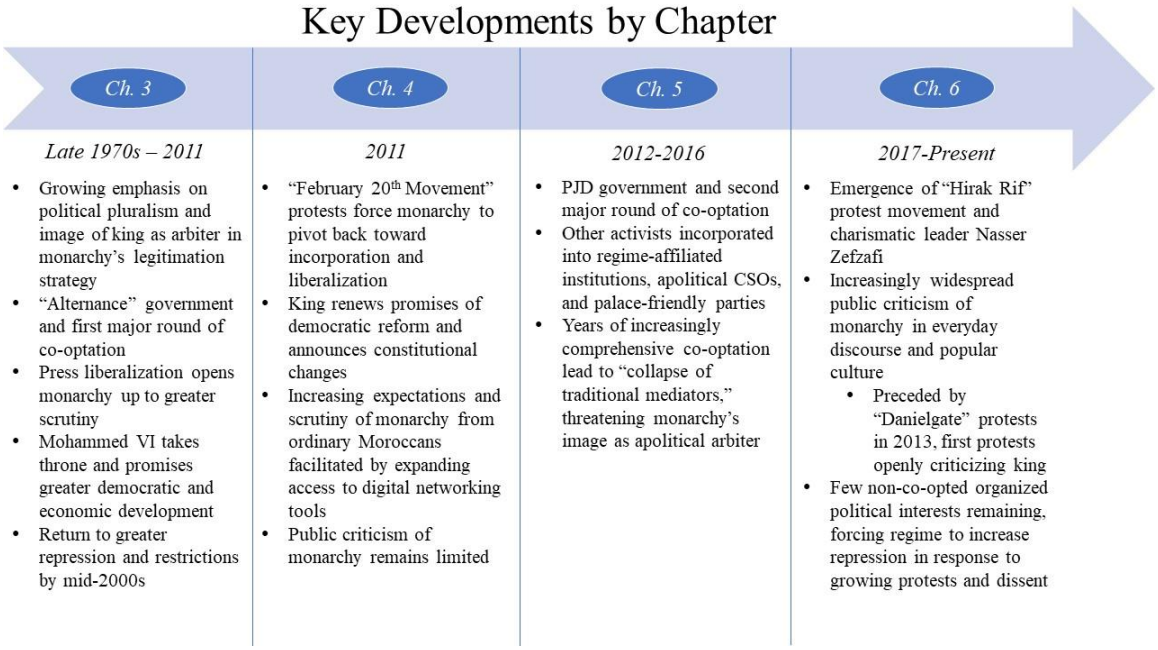
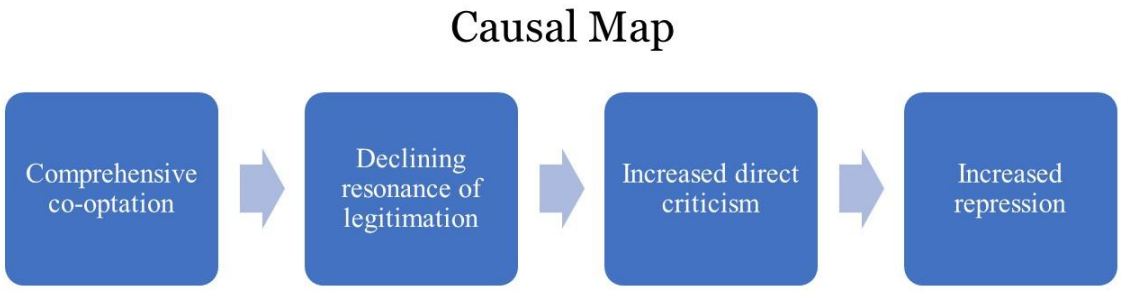


Figure 3



CHAPTER TWO

Autocracy, Legitimacy, and Compliance in Political Science and Beyond

"Every publicly given justification for inequality thus marks out a kind of symbolic Achilles' heel where the elite is especially vulnerable" — Jim Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (105, 1990).

As scholars of authoritarianism have increasingly turned their attention away from elites and formal institutions, legitimation has assumed a more prominent role in explanations of authoritarian durability alongside co-optation and repression. This recent embrace of legitimation follows a decades-long decline in interest in the neighboring concept of legitimacy, which scholars had largely dismissed as epiphenomenal to explanations of regime reproduction and collapse (Marquez 2016). The two concepts, however, are distinct: whereas legitimation refers to an action or process that regimes undertake to ensure their reproduction (Gerschewski 2013; 2018), legitimacy is a property of a political system that turns on *belief* in a regime's virtue or appropriateness (Lipset 1960, 77). In other words, legitimation turns the focus toward process and not outcome, leaving it as an open empirical question what outcome legitimation yields—whether actual belief in a regime's legitimacy, "compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration" (Gerschewski 2013, 18; see also Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017, 253). In doing so, scholars have thus been able to sidestep the thorny theoretical questions about the relationship between *belief* in a regime's virtue and regime reproduction that dogged earlier studies of legitimacy and theorize legitimation alongside

co-optation and repression as one of three "pillars" of authoritarian reproduction strategies.

In this chapter, I explore and challenge key elements of this emerging literature on legitimation, arguing that the prevailing understanding of the concept obscures what *kind* of practice legitimation is and how it is influenced by co-optation and repression. Existing literature also leaves critical questions about the reproduction and breakdown of legitimation claims unanswered. How, for example, do ordinary people interpret authoritarian legitimation claims and evaluate autocrats' fidelity to these claims? Under what conditions might their perceptions about autocrats' performance change? Finally, how do changing perceptions affect patterns of compliance and dissent in everyday discourse, and with what consequences for the strategies authoritarian elites devise to maintain power and quiescence? Drawing on empirical evidence from contemporary Morocco, where the monarchy's legitimation claim has been met with growing public skepticism and dissent, I develop an alternative framework for studying authoritarian legitimation as the interdependent, discursive counterpart to co-optation and repression.

Specifically, I argue that legitimation claims are best understood as public justifications for why a leader or regime has a right to rule, and that these claims impose obligations or public standards of performance on leaders. Rooted in discourse, legitimation claims are subject to ongoing struggle over their meaning, the obligations they impose on leaders, and whether leaders are perceived as fulfilling those obligations. Thus I do not argue that legitimation breaks down automatically whenever a leader fails to meet the obligations set forth in their specific legitimation claims: plenty of dictators flout the publicly stated justifications for their rule and face few consequences. Indeed,

the contemporary Moroccan monarchy has never truly served as a neutral arbiter who sits above the political fray. Yet when leaders regularly and publicly do so, this can create "rhetorical space" (Scott 1990, 18) for regime opponents to launch "legitimate" critiques highlighting leaders' hypocrisy. This is in part because autocrats' legitimation claims are not simply statements which have true or false value; they are also narratives about what authoritarian leaders promise to their citizens and, as a consequence, criticism grounded in the language of these narratives is more likely to be considered acceptable by others. So while dissent never fully disappears in any authoritarian regime and the range of grievances held by regime opponents is likely to be wide, when autocrats' public behavior makes it easier for opponents to highlight the gap between legitimation claims and reality, opponents have more space for launching critiques than they might otherwise. In Morocco, the expanding scope and pace of co-optation, aided by heightened levels of politicization following the 2011 MENA uprisings and expanding access to digital networking tools, have created such a space. Regime opponents have, in turn, taken advantage of this window, sparking new, and unprecedented, forms of public dissent and protest to which the monarchy has been compelled to respond with the primarily coercive tools it has remaining.

This chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I begin by defining the two counterparts to legitimation: co-optation and repression. Second, I review the primary gaps in the literature on authoritarian legitimation, revisiting and expanding on the shortcomings introduced in the first chapter and focusing especially on the confusing ways in which legitimation is often defined in the literature. Next, I propose defining legitimation claims as public standards of ruling elite performance, elaborating an

alternative framework for studying the relationship between legitimation, ordinary citizens' perceptions, and the other two reproduction strategies authoritarian elites rely on to maintain power. Finally, I discuss the circumstances under which co-optation can negatively affect legitimation, focusing particularly on the tension between the two in monarchies like Morocco and outlining the consequences of this tension for regime reproduction strategies more broadly. Throughout the chapter, I weave in empirical details from Morocco and elsewhere to support my argument.

1. Preliminaries: Defining Repression and Co-optation

Before reconceptualizing legitimation and how it relates both to ordinary citizens' perceptions and to repression and co-optation, it is important to first define these other two reproduction strategies. Repression is often considered the cornerstone of authoritarianism and can take a variety of forms, not all of them involving physical violence. In what follows, I use Davenport's conceptualization of repression as "the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices, or institutions" (2007, 2). Repression thus encompasses a wide array of coercive practices, from "high intensity" actions involving physical violence, like beating protesters or assassinating oppositional figures, to "low intensity" actions, like surveilling activists or intimidating independent journalists (Levitsky and Way 2010, 57-58). In what follows, I will use the terms coercion and repression interchangeably.

Compared with repression, co-optation has received far more attention from scholars. Described in much of the literature as the process of incorporating politically important individual and collective actors[1] into the regime, co-optation is intended to give would-be rivals a stake in the regime's survival while simultaneously neutralizing them as a potential threat to the incumbent. Implied in these accounts is that co-optation entails a type of redistribution from the incumbent regime to the target of co-optation. This redistribution can take the form of policy concessions (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007), patronage (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2008), or other benefits that accrue from incorporation into regime-controlled institutions.

Yet, as Fenner argues in her pathbreaking monograph on the concept, co-optation actually encompasses "two distinct but interrelated processes, incorporation and neutralization" (2016, 3). The former refers to the "act of bringing [politically important] actors into the formal structures of a political regime" while the latter refers to the process whereby these actors are "rendered unthreatening (or less threatening) to authoritarian incumbents" (*ibid*). Importantly, as Fenner argues, incorporation itself does not lead directly to neutralization; instead, incorporation leads to neutralization because of how it is perceived by others, including ordinary citizens. Specifically, incorporation renders co-opted actors irrelevant, generating a perception of their having 'sold-out,' particularly when there is a "temporal disconnect" between how the actor "narrates its incorporation" and how it is perceived by "ordinary people, scholars, pundits, and [...] politicians" (39). For example, if a prominent human rights activist is incorporated into a

[1] For example, the co-optation of a collective actor might entail the legalization and incorporation into parliament of an oppositional political party. An example of individual co-optation could include the naming of a former human rights activist to an important state body. I use co-optation and incorporation interchangeably throughout this text.

regime to serve as an adviser and the regime continues widespread rights abuses, this might generate the perception of that actor having 'sold out' or been 'bought off,' thus sapping them of credibility and making them a target of blame. This aspect of co-optation—that it works by shielding leaders from blame and saps targets of credibility due to their proximity to the regime—will be especially important later in this chapter when discussing how and why co-optation can undermine certain kinds of legitimation claims like the claim to being above the fray promulgated by the Moroccan monarchy.

Finally, and following Fenner's lead, I do *not* consider petty patronage, clientelism, or corruption to be forms of co-optation. A citizen might receive patronage from a co-opted political party in exchange for their electoral support, but this does not mean that individual has been co-opted—meaning incorporated into the regime and then neutralized—in any meaningful sense. Fenner notes that the "type and level of participation" is what matters most for determining whether the co-optation label might usefully be applied to any given actor. Those who receive patronage in exchange for their vote in elections are not co-opted in the same sense as a politician, activist, or some other public figure whose participation is more readily conceived as voluntary and the product of meaningful choice and deliberation (3, fn. 3). Thus in what follows, when I discuss the Moroccan monarchy's accelerating co-optation, I am referring to the monarchy's increasing attempts to incorporate oppositional actors into regime-controlled institutions in order to deflect blame away from the monarchy and to sap co-opted actors of their credibility.

2. Ambiguities of Legitimation

2.1 Shortcomings in the literature on legitimation

While increasing interest in legitimation in the literature is a welcome sign that scholars are beginning to take the non-redistributive, non-coercive aspects of authoritarian reproduction strategies seriously, the concept remains poorly theorized. Indeed, the prevailing understanding of legitimation makes it difficult to distinguish from co-optation and repression, obscures what *kind* of practice or action legitimation is, and leaves critical questions about the interpretation and breakdown of legitimation claims unanswered. Some of this might stem from the lack of clarity in how the term is used and the nuanced, somewhat equivocal nature of the initial definitions proposed by Gerschewski, beginning with his influential article introducing the "three pillars of stability" (2013). In that article, Gerschewski simultaneously defines legitimation "as the process of gaining support which is based on an empirical, Weberian tradition of 'legitimacy belief,'" and then as the process of gaining "active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (2013, 18). Yet belief in a regime's legitimacy—that is, its appropriateness or virtue—is not the same as compliance with norms, and while the latter is indispensable for a regime's ability to reproduce itself, the former is not.

In a later, more refined piece where he compares legitimacy with cognate terms like 'support' and 'trust,' Gerschewski ultimately concludes that autocratic legitimation practices are unlikely to produce genuine legitimacy beliefs, though this remains an "empirical question" (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017, 253). Thus, while legitimation practices *may* engender beliefs in a regime's appropriateness in some cases, much of

what they do is simply facilitate compliance with norms. Legitimation claims work, then, not necessarily because they are internalized and naturalize compliance, but rather because they create incentives for public compliance with norms, regardless of belief.

By introducing the concept of legitimation to the literature on authoritarian stability, Gerschewski opens up space for scholars to study the non-coercive, non-cooptive aspects of authoritarian reproduction strategies, and to do so without getting tied up in the thorny theoretical questions about the relationship between *belief* in a regime's virtue and its durability that dogged earlier studies of legitimacy. Yet we still lack a clear definition of legitimation that distinguishes it from co-optation and repression. Indeed, Gerschewski defines legitimation as the process of gaining "active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (2013, 18)—yet this same definition could be just as easily applied to co-optation and repression. As authoritarian reproduction strategies, co-optation and repression are *also* about securing consent, compliance, obedience, and toleration. So what makes legitimation different from co-optation and repression?

2.2 Legitimation as the discursive counterpart to co-optation and repression

I argue that legitimation is best understood as the discursive, ideational-symbolic counterpart to co-optation and repression. Collectively, these three practices help foster public norm compliance and quiescence, facilitating regime reproduction. While, as I will demonstrate, these reproduction strategies are interdependent and can both complement and constrain each other, each has its own logic. Repression, for example, involves the use of physical coercion or the threat thereof to impose costs on those who run afoul of

red lines and to deter future norm defiance by others. Co-optation, on the other hand, involves the material redistribution of power and/or resources to key actors who might otherwise pose a threat to quiescence. However, legitimation is fundamentally about discourse, rituals, and spectacles—about the narratives and symbols regimes deploy and the rituals and spectacles they stage to maintain quiescence and endure (see Figure 4 below). Legitimation claims are thus a subset of legitimation: legitimation claims are public justifications for rule that delineate why a particular leader or regime ought to rule, whereas legitimation refers to the broader set of practices or "maintenance work" (Scott 1990, 45) that sustains these claims. Legitimation encompasses practices like disseminating propaganda and official historiography which contain justificatory claims, as well as staging ceremonies and spectacles that serve to reinforce these claims by providing the occasion for ordinary people to reproduce them. This, in turn, helps generate further evidence of a regime's popularity, spurring preference falsification and making it easier for authoritarian elites to maintain power.

Figure 4

Pillar	Legitimation	Co-optation	Repression
Logic/class of action	Discursive/Ideational-Symbolic	Material/Redistributive	Physical/Coercive

In contemporary Morocco, the monarchy legitimates its rule by claiming to serve as a neutral arbiter above, and apart, from the unscrupulous world of everyday parliamentary politics and politicians. This claim is disseminated through propaganda on

state media, in school textbooks and official historiography which cast the king as the savior of Moroccan nationalism and guarantor of stability, and finds its way into everyday discourse with recurring tropes like, "the king is good, but those around him are bad" (Bennani-Chraïbi 2017) and "the king is working hard, but the politicians only care about themselves" (Field notes, 2/20). This core legitimation claim is then reinforced through myriad rituals like the annual *bay'a* in which elected politicians gather to pledge allegiance to the king and the regularized, formal speeches the king delivers on specific national holidays. And most importantly, the monarchy's legitimation claim is reinforced through selective co-optation, which pits rival political factions against one another and allows blame to fall on them, and not the monarchy, for the kingdom's problems. Thus to summarize: in order to promote public norm compliance and ensure regime reproduction, authoritarian elites apply coercion to dissident actors to demobilize them and deter others, seek to incorporate oppositional actors into regime-controlled institutions to deflect blame and neutralize them, and they deploy and reinforce justificatory claims through propaganda, historiography, and ceremonies to defend their right to rule.

Defining legitimation as the discursive, ideational-symbolic counterpart to repression and co-optation renders legible what *kind* of action it is and enables us to better identify the logic of each of the three so-called pillars of stability. But while each reproduction strategy has a unique logic, they are not independent of one another, and each can both complement or constrain the others. For example, an attempt to incorporate a revolutionary hero into a regime-controlled institution might help reinforce justificatory claims about how the regime safeguards hard-won revolutionary victories. In such a case, the co-optation of a specific actor might be understood as complementing a broader

legitimation strategy. But the logic of the two practices remains distinct: elites incorporate a key actor, redistributing some power and material resources to them, for example; then, they craft and disseminate a narrative that portrays that actor's incorporation as consistent with the regime's public justification for rule, which then gets folded into official discourse and reproduced by ordinary people. Similarly, the targeted use of coercion might also in some instances serve the broader ends of legitimation. In Morocco, for example, the repression of pro-independence Sahrawi dissidents in the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara has arguably helped reinforce the monarchy's broader legitimation claim of guaranteeing stability, in part because such actions can be portrayed as helping safeguard Moroccan "territorial integrity." Here, repression aids legitimation. Thus, while I have attempted to define legitimation in a way that makes it clear what kind of action it is and how it differs from co-optation and repression, the three practices are interdependent and can complement each other.

Just as there can be complementarities between reproduction strategies, so too can one strategy undermine the other. The broad literature on repression and backlash indicates as much, and Gerschewski notes this in passing when introducing the concept of what he terms the three pillars of stability. Specifically, he observes that "repression comes with unintended consequences and can weaken the legitimation function" and, as such, "hard repression might prove to be incompatible" with some types of regimes (2013, 28). Harsh forms of coercion, in other words, might undermine some kinds of legitimation claims in some contexts, providing an opportunity for opponents to launch "legitimate" critiques, potentially disrupting preference falsification and triggering broader norm defiance. In such instances, a regime might be compelled to rebalance

among its reproduction strategies—perhaps adopting a more conciliatory posture by offering regime opponents concessions and the opportunity for incorporation.

But how does this process unfold, and what determines whether regime actions which are at odds with the justificatory claims they promulgate actually end up undermining those claims? And, more broadly, if repression can undermine some kinds of legitimation claims, what about co-optation? While defining legitimation as the discursive counterpart to co-optation and repression helps us identify what legitimation is, we still need a framework for answering these questions—for understanding what drives the reproduction of justificatory claims by ordinary people, how and when this might break down, and how breakdown impacts how authoritarian elites balance among reproduction strategies. The next section attempts to elaborate just such a framework.

3. Legitimation as Public Standards of Ruling Elite Performance

To formulate a new theoretical framework for studying legitimation that meets these criteria, I first return to the epigraph that opens this chapter, which comes from James Scott's landmark book on the reproduction and disruption of relations of domination. Writing on what he terms the "infrapolitics," or the "disguised resistance," of subordinate groups (1990, 199), Scott foregrounds the apparent tension between the dissembling public behavior of such groups and their more unencumbered "offstage" behavior. This latter set of speech, gestures, and expressions forms part of what Scott calls the "hidden transcript," whereas the "public transcript" refers to the more constrained and cautious discourse that takes place between the powerful and the weak while in public. The public transcript, then, is primarily about keeping up appearances

and "[appealing] to the expectations of the powerful" (1990, 2). Under normal circumstances, for a variety of reasons—fear or pragmatism, desperation or strategy—Scott argues that subordinate groups have every incentive to uphold "hegemonic appearances" (85) and comply with established norms of appropriate behavior and speech, regardless of their defiant, subversive, or otherwise noncompliant offstage behavior. Yet this arrangement, Scott notes, imposes obligations on the dominant elite as well. They, too, must maintain hegemonic appearances, and they, too, behave differently offstage. For this system of domination to be able to reproduce itself as-is, these offstage elements—the hidden transcript of the powerful and weak alike—must remain offstage. Yet when the dominant elite fail to maintain hegemonic appearances, fail to uphold the standards implied in their claims to domination, they become vulnerable to critique from "within the hegemony" (105). While opponents might levy such critiques cynically, others who perhaps otherwise support the dominant elite might also be motivated to launch similar critiques. Both types of critique, however, signal a breakdown in the legitimation of that relation of domination—threatening its reproduction and compelling the dominant elite to change course.

We might, I propose, define legitimation claims similarly: as public standards of ruling elite performance, standards which impose particular obligations on leaders, are open to interpretation by ordinary citizens, and, subject to their interpretation, can provide a window for critique—whether sincere or not—to go public, rupturing the "smooth surface of apparent consent" (Scott 1990, 204), disrupting preference falsification, and forcing authoritarian elites to recalibrate how they balance legitimation with co-optation and repression. In other words, in addition to deploying repression and

incorporating oppositional actors, I argue that all autocrats narrate and justify their rule, but they do so under the scrutiny of ordinary citizens who can impose costs when incumbents are perceived to run afoul of these legitimation claims.

This conceptualization of legitimation claims centers the role of interpretation in their reproduction, enables us to analyze compliance without inferring belief in specific legitimation claims or support for a regime, and facilitates investigation of how legitimation claims might break down and impact other reproduction strategies. In adapting Scott's framework for studying "hidden transcripts" to the interpretation and breakdown of authoritarian legitimation claims, this project also builds on an influential work in political science and sociology, demonstrating one way in which hidden transcripts might "go public"—a process Scott leaves largely unexplored. In the sections that follow, I elaborate this alternative theory of legitimation as public standards of elite performance, sketching out how legitimation claims are disseminated and reinforced by authoritarian elites, interpreted and monitored by citizens, and are subject to breakdown when opponents successfully seize on hypocrisy to launch "legitimate" critiques from "within the hegemony."

But first, what about autocrats for whom legitimation seems an afterthought? Indeed, in regimes where rulers rely extensively on repression, legitimation claims may be so spurious or absurd that they provide little opportunity or "rhetorical space" for public dissent to break through, at least on the terms set out by the regime in its legitimation claims. The claims promulgated by Hafez al-Asad's regime in Syria and detailed by Wedeen in her 1999 monograph, for example, scarcely seem to fit the label of a legitimation or justificatory claim. Absurd claims—like that Asad is Syria's "premier

pharmacist"—and the obligation to nonetheless repeat them in public, seem instead to discipline citizens and instill a sense of the regime's power in a way not dissimilar to repression/coercion.[2] Put otherwise, the legitimation claims promulgated in Syria under Hafez al-Asad (or at least the patently absurd ones Wedeen details) do not make concessions to subordinates' interests in the same way the Moroccan monarchy's claims do.[3] Thus the framework for studying legitimation I develop below might be most usefully applied beyond Morocco to those regimes where, like Morocco, the ruling elite maintain practical or *de facto* power over core government functions yet also provide significant, if circumscribed, avenues for civic and political participation. These liberalized autocracies lean more heavily on legitimation than their (more) illiberal counterparts, and thus I suggest are more vulnerable to the type of public critique that exploits the perceived gap between standards of ruling elite performance and actual performance. In such regimes, then, legitimation claims can be expected to carry some "rhetorical force" (Scott 1990, 18) and are not simply cheap talk.

3.1 When hypocrisy in legitimation claims matters

[2] For example, we would not expect the claim that Hafez al-Asad is Syria's "premier pharmacist" (Wedeen 1999, 1) to offer much interpretive leeway for ordinary citizens to criticize his rule. Indeed it may not be appropriate to label claims like these as legitimation claims. Yet they do represent a similar class of action: they are neither materially redistributive (co-optation) nor physically coercive (repression). They represent an ideational/symbolic counterpart to the Asad regime's co-optation and repression. In the extreme case of Syria, though, these ideational/symbolic claims may approach something like coercion and operate as a form of what Wedeen terms "disciplinary-symbolic power" (1999, 145).

[3] Scott argues that if rulers wish for their legitimation claims "to have any rhetorical force among subordinates" they must contain "some concessions to their presumed interests" or otherwise work to socialize subordinates into an understanding of their interests consonant with legitimation claims (1990, 18; see also discussion on p. 77). Clearly, though, not all regimes invest much in crafting rhetorically appealing justificatory claims and instead lean on other strategies to maintain quiescence and ensure their reproduction.

Hypocrisy abounds in all relations of domination, and rulers everywhere can be found engaging in activity that contradicts their public declarations. Indeed, in Morocco the monarchy has never truly served as a neutral arbiter above the political fray; the palace has long been the center of the political world in the kingdom, and this reality has not substantively changed despite the precipitous increase in norm-defying discourse in recent years. To be clear, then, the claim advanced here is not that hypocrisy is fatal for a regime, or that legitimation claims must correspond with reality in order to forestall regime collapse, as the example of performative governance (Ding 2020) cited in chapter one attests. Rather the claim is that hypocrisy provides an opening for ordinary citizens to criticize the ruling elite on the basis of the elite's own, self-declared standards. While this can escalate over time to broader critiques of the whole system of domination, pushing elites to shift reproduction strategies, only in rare cases might such developments result in revolution or regime change.

I argue that while few autocrats hew closely to their legitimation claims in practice, this hypocrisy matters most when it is *visible* and *regular*. Unlike hypocrisy which is episodic or otherwise well-concealed, repeated and unavoidably public hypocrisy can provide the sustained "rhetorical space" (Scott 1990, 18) and time necessary for regime opponents to be able to launch "legitimate" critiques that leverage this hypocrisy against autocrats, and that resonate among ordinary people. Indeed, autocrats are vulnerable to what Scott terms "critiques within hegemony" which effectively "call upon the elite to take its own rhetoric seriously" (1990, 106-107). This is in part because autocrats' legitimation claims are not simply statements which have true or false value; they are also narratives about what authoritarian leaders promise to their

citizens and, as a consequence, criticism from ordinary citizens grounded in these narratives is more likely to be considered acceptable by others. So while dissent never fully disappears in any authoritarian regime and the range of grievances held by regime opponents is likely to be wide, when autocrats' repeated, public behavior makes it easier for opponents to highlight the gap between legitimation claims and reality, opponents have more space and time for launching critiques than they might otherwise.

This kind of "friendly" critique is not dissimilar to what O'Brien terms "rightful resistance" (1996) or the activism engendered by "empty promises" Distelhorst identifies in China (2017). In the latter case, Distelhorst notes how the failures of superficial, "quasi-democratic" institutions—institutions of authoritarian responsiveness that are integral to the CCP's legitimation practices—provided Chinese activists with "politically anodyne frames" for their activism, enabling them to extract concessions precisely because their demands were grounded in the regime's own language (465). Importantly, those who levy such "critiques within hegemony" need not do so sincerely; as Scott notes, the "plasticity" of justificatory claims "provides antagonists with political resources in the form of political claims that are legitimated by that ideology. Whether he believes in the rules or not, only a fool would fail to appreciate the possible benefits of deploying such readily available ideological resources" (1990, 95). In Morocco, the monarchy's repeated and increasingly apparent interference in politics thus did not have to change people's ideas and preferences about the monarchy to negatively impact legitimation, though it certainly did for some; instead, it only needed to provide an opening, a window of opportunity for individuals to use the king's own legitimation claim against him—to put "hegemonic ideology to good advantage" (Scott 1990, 95).

While the kind of criticism that arises from unrealized legitimation claims may start as a critique from within, it can quickly escalate. Subordinate groups may begin by "seeking objectives that could, in principle, be accommodated within the prevailing social order," but over time, their 'friendly' demands can devolve into full-fledged critiques of the entire system of domination (Scott 1990, 77).[4] Many of the historical revolutions scholars study, like the Russian revolutions of the early 20th century, demonstrate as much (e.g. Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 2001). Thus factory workers in Tsarist Russia who set out clamoring for improved working conditions were not necessarily advocating for socializing the means of production; those who supported the Tsar but who righteously resisted his reforms because they conflicted with his public claims were not necessarily seeking his ouster. The Russian revolution, like all revolutions, was a contingent outcome. But the gradual escalation of critique and breakdown of legitimation that preceded it were key facilitating conditions that helped make it possible. And it was the opening provided by hypocrisy and leveraged by ordinary people that triggered this process of breakdown in the first place.

In sum, legitimation claims create focal points for the formation of grievances around those specific features of authoritarian leaders' behavior that bear on their public justifications for rule. Grievances grounded in autocrats' perceived abrogation of their promises about how they will rule threaten to appeal to broader swaths of society than other forms of critique, in part because they are "legitimate" by default and thus can

[4] Interpreting claims set forth in Barrington Moore's *Injustice*, Scott suggests there might be a "gradient of radicalism in the interrogation of domination," that ranges from claiming some or all the ruling elite have "violated the norms by which they claim to rule" to "[repudiating] the very principles by which the dominant stratum justifies its dominance" (1990, 92). We can observe a similar pattern in the breakdown of legitimation and progressive escalation of critique in Morocco today.

impact perceptions of even regime supporters. When this abrogation is unavoidably public and repeated, opponents have a greater chance of successfully launching "legitimate" critiques that resonate widely, disrupt preference falsification, and contribute to the breakdown of legitimation. Legitimation claims are thus not entirely autocrats' alone to craft, disseminate, and control: they also endow opponents and ordinary people with powerful discursive tools for countering perceived regime excesses.

What happens when public, repeated hypocrisy and the subsequent "legitimate" critiques of opponents cause legitimation to break down? To be sure, revolution and open rebellion are rare occurrences, but when legitimation breaks down because opponents have successfully leveraged hypocrisy against the regime, authoritarian elites are often compelled to respond by shifting their reproduction strategies in order to restore hegemonic appearances. In the case of complaints about pollution in China, for example, officials have responded by attempting to foster the perception of effective environmental stewardship through performance; this has enabled the regime to sustain a legitimation strategy emphasizing responsive governance without needing to resort to greater repression or incorporation, which likely would be more costly.[5] In many other cases, however, critiques that highlight hypocrisy in legitimation claims are met with swift punishment (Scott 1990, 19), especially if the criticism concerns leaders themselves or otherwise crosses discursive red lines. Indeed, while the Chinese regime may permit

[5] It should be noted, however, that Ding does not analyze legitimation in terms of specific, justificatory claims. She also does not argue that the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) primary justification for rule is that it provides good environmental governance or clean air. Yet I argue that performative governance as described by Ding—the maintenance work the regime undertakes to maintain the perception of effective environmental stewardship—can be usefully conceptualized as a type of legitimation. And while responsiveness to environmental complaints might not be explicitly part of the primary justificatory claims the CCP disseminates, good environmental governance could be considered a subset of good governance and 'responsiveness' more broadly, both of which *are* key to the CCP's legitimation.

some kinds of criticism and protest (Lorentzen 2013; 2014) and strive to uphold appearances consistent with its legitimation claims, collective action attempts or direct criticism of regime elite are met with swift punishment (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013).

As for Morocco, throughout the kingdom's contemporary political history, regime opponents have often attempted to leverage the king's frequent and direct political interference in political processes against him, highlighting the gap between the monarchy's claim to serving as an apolitical arbiter and its actual performance. Particularly during the reign of former King Hassan II (1961-1999), opponents battled fiercely with the monarchy over its undue political interference—to which the regime responded with brutal repression. Yet despite the efforts of oppositional actors, criticism highlighting the monarchy's hypocrisy vis-a-vis its public justification for rule never triggered a significant breakdown of preference falsification or sparked the broader wave of public norm defiance and direct criticism observable today. Indeed, near-absolute control over mass media along with a co-optation strategy predicated on dividing the organized opposition and deflecting blame away from the king enabled the Moroccan monarchy to keep up appearances sufficiently so as to discourage public defiance of speech norms and perpetuate public preference falsification—even though the monarchy's legitimation claim never aligned with reality. In other words, the reproduction of legitimation claims like the Moroccan monarchy's depends not necessarily on the claim being believable, but rather on it being *pragmatic to reproduce* because *others* appear to believe it. And in most cases, opponents' attempts to disrupt this cycle of preference falsification and the reproduction of legitimation claims by leveraging hypocrisy against the regime are unsuccessful.

In Morocco today, and for reasons that will be explained below, there is evidence that hypocrisy is catching up with the monarchy and that for many ordinary Moroccans it is no longer pragmatic to simply reproduce regime rhetoric, including among those who might otherwise be supportive of the monarchy. Indeed, thanks in part to rapidly expanding access to digital networking tools and the proliferation of popular, online political commentators, those carrying messages criticizing regime hypocrisy have the ability to reach a much wider audience than the opponents of Hassan II did in a previous era. Yet even still, I do not claim that hypocrisy is fatal for the Moroccan monarchy's continued reproduction, even if the current level of norm-defying discourse has seriously tarnished the king's image and prompted a shift toward greater repression. The Moroccan monarchy, like other regimes that encounter resistance to its legitimation claims, has rebalanced its reproduction strategies toward greater repression. But the texture of political life in Morocco has changed markedly as a result: according to the leading independent human rights organization in the kingdom, the number of political prisoners in Morocco today is the highest it has been in a generation.[6] And as the monarchy increases repression in response to criticism, both legitimate and otherwise, it continues to risk backlash. Thus while many authoritarian regimes promulgate legitimation claims that are at odds with their actual performance, and in most instances opponents who try to leverage such hypocrisy to launch critiques are met with swift punishment, under some conditions critiques break through, disrupting preference falsification and spurring changes in how the regime manages dissent. In the next section, I explore in greater detail how authoritarian elites attempt to ward off such an outcome through "maintenance

[6] Field Notes, January 2020.

work" which conceals hypocrisy and imposes constraints on their exercise of power, but which may over time cease to be effective.

3.2 Concealing hypocrisy through maintenance work

The justificatory claims authoritarian elites promulgate are intended to "affirm and naturalize the power" of leaders, but just as importantly they also serve to "conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule" (Scott 1990, 18). It is this "dirty linen," or hypocrisy, that opponents seek to exploit and that poses a particular threat to authoritarian elites trying to contain dissent and maintain quiescence. As Scott writes, the dissemination of legitimation claims by leaders necessarily "creates a potential zone of dirty linen that, if exposed, would contradict the pretension of legitimate domination" (105). Inasmuch as authoritarian elites emphasize legitimation in their reproduction strategies[7]—and wish to avoid the risks associated with rebalancing among strategies should the perception of hypocrisy trigger the breakdown of legitimation—they will thus find themselves constrained by their own stated justifications for rule and obliged to undertake maintenance work that reinforces appearances consistent with these justifications.

In Morocco, for example, when the regime disseminates a narrative that "the king is good, it's just those around him who are bad"—the kind of narrative that serves to reinforce the monarchy's claim to being an apolitical arbiter above the fray—it must also ensure that the distinction between the king and "those around him" remains salient.

[7] Not all authoritarian regimes rely on legitimation as heavily to ensure their reproduction. See earlier discussion at beginning of section 3.

Maintaining the ritualized separation between the institution of the monarchy and the broader political scene, in other words, helps ease the dissemination and reproduction of the monarchy's claim to being an apolitical arbiter above the fray—but it also constrains the regime. In order to keep its dirty linen hidden, and sustain its particular balance of reproduction strategies, the monarchy must engage in ongoing maintenance work. Some of this entails disseminating propaganda and staging ceremonies and rituals which provide the occasion for ordinary Moroccans to reproduce official rhetoric and justificatory claims. Other aspects of this maintenance work are realized through tricks of language and the "magic protocols" (Al-Ziyani 2017, 24-25) that mark the king as separate. Thus perfunctory adulations precede and follow mentions of the king in official discourse, while the monarch himself never grants interviews or speaks outside of regularized intervals in ceremonial contexts. When he does speak, it is always in formal Arabic, not *darija*. Rhetorical conventions like these, alongside rituals and ceremonies, help maintain the ritualized separation between the monarchy and politics. But insulating the monarchy from politics—and by extension, the problems politics create—is accomplished primarily through the selective co-optation of oppositional actors which pits political rivals against each other and directs blame toward them, not the king, for the kingdom's endemic political and economic problems. That the Moroccan king is *not* an apolitical arbiter is thus less a problem than sustaining this cycle of selective co-optation which helps conceal the monarchy's "dirty linen"—that is, its routine and direct interference in Moroccan politics.

Yet even if rulers prioritize the kind of maintenance work necessary to keep up appearances and ward off potentially threatening "legitimate" criticism, perceptions are

malleable, and rulers' own public justifications for rule can quickly be turned against them. In other words, while leaders may craft legitimation claims, facilitate their dissemination, and endeavor to appear consistent with them, they have limited control over how their citizens interpret and ultimately reproduce legitimation claims—and in some instances, the very maintenance work required to facilitate legitimation can contribute to its undermining.

The example provided by the deposed Russian monarchy is instructive. Key to the tsar's legitimation in 19th century Russia was what Field calls the "myth" of the "tsar-deliverer" which cast the monarch as a benevolent defender of the peasantry whose good intentions were frequently foiled by "self-seeking bureaucrats" (1976, 14). Yet while the tsarist regime initially helped bolster this myth and viewed it as key to ensuring quiescence and regime reproduction, over time the maintenance work required to sustain this myth ceased to be effective. Indeed, as the myth, or legitimation claim, gained traction among the peasantry, the regime found itself constrained by how ordinary citizens interpreted the claim and increasingly unable to conceal the tsar's actual behavior, which was in tension with both his public presentation as benevolent warrior on behalf of the downtrodden, and the broader myth of the tsar-as-deliverer the regime helped foster to maintain this public presentation. When the tsar ordered the emancipation of Russia's serfs, for example, the underwhelming reforms and bungled implementation that followed drew a negative reaction from the peasantry; invoking the myth of the tsar-as-deliverer, many insisted that the 'real' reforms had surely been foiled by unscrupulous bureaucrats and openly resisted their implementation, in some cases even necessitating military intervention to quell the unrest (Finkel, Gehlbach, and Olsen

2015).[8] The Russian regime thus found that they "could not manipulate the myth of the tsar against what the [peasantry] conceived to be its interests" (Field 1976, 21). In other words, while the regime dutifully facilitated the reproduction of the myth of the tsar-as-deliverer and endeavored to maintain appearances consistent with this myth, including through reforms designed to be responsive to peasants' interests, this did not stave off dissent indefinitely—in part because the tsar's *actual* behavior conflicted so dramatically and repeatedly with the image painted by his legitimation claim. Indeed, legitimation eventually broke down entirely—and with it, the monarchy—in the revolutionary convulsions that rocked Russia at the turn of the 20th century.

What the example of tsarist Russia illustrates is not that the maintenance work authoritarian elites undertake to foster public appearances consistent with legitimation claims always fails and sparks revolution. Instead, it shows that there is a limit to what maintenance work can conceal, and that beyond a certain threshold of sustained and public hypocrisy, maintenance work can in fact help make visible and more salient the very hypocrisy which it is intended to conceal. Otherwise put, maintenance work draws attention to and helps entrench legitimation claims in public discourse; but as this process unfolds, and if autocrats continue to violate their promises about how they will rule, these efforts to further entrench legitimation claims can backfire. The more the tsarist regime leaned on the myth of the tsar-as-deliverer for legitimation, and the more the tsar's *actual* behavior continued to be at odds with this myth, the greater the opening provided to opponents for launching legitimate critiques of hegemony. In the case of tsarist Russia, those critiques quickly escalated and contributed to regime collapse; but even in contexts

[8] For example, a peasant might have exclaimed, "If the czar only knew of the crimes his faithless agents were committing in his name, he would punish them and rectify matters!" (Scott 1990, 100).

where regimes do not collapse, maintenance work can only hide so much—and beyond a particular threshold, it may only further draw attention to leader hypocrisy.

The operation of the myth of the tsar in imperial Russia—and its tension with the *reality* of the tsar—is not dissimilar to the myth of the apolitical, benevolent monarch in Morocco today. And while it is by no means inevitable that the Moroccan regime will meet the same fate as the Russian one, there is a fundamental "tension between power and benevolence" (20) at the heart of both the myth of the tsar-as-deliverer and the Moroccan monarchy's legitimation claim. Until recently, and as in tsarist Russia, the monarchy had largely proved adept at keeping this tension from rupturing the myth's reproduction—and with it, the regime's broader balance between legitimation, co-optation, and repression. Through ongoing maintenance work that stages elaborate royal ceremonies, reinforces staid royal protocol, and, most importantly, pits rival political factions against one another through selective incorporation, the Moroccan regime attempts to conceal the king's hypocrisy vis-a-vis his public justifications for rule.

Yet, as in tsarist Russia, there are limits to what this maintenance work can conceal, and the monarchy's ongoing co-optation practices, combined with the king's sustained and public interventions in politics, have begun to undermine legitimation in the kingdom. Indeed, questions that before had only ever been raised privately are now increasingly asked openly: "If the all-powerful king is benevolent, then why has he not used his power for good?" and "If the king is good but those around him are bad, why do the latter continue to frustrate his good intentions?" In the words of one long-time human rights defender, "many Moroccans for the first time have come to see the monarchy as

creating problems rather than protecting the country"[9], while others, never enamored with monarchism, have nonetheless taken the opportunity to engage in seemingly good faith critique of it.

Like other rulers, the Moroccan king's legitimation claim and the public standards it imposes have always been subject to discursive struggle, and following independence in 1956, then-King Mohammed V successfully translated his symbolic capital into a claim to political primacy. Mohammed V's heirs have subsequently built on this by embracing limited political pluralism and turning to selective co-optation to maintain the perception of an apolitical arbiter who sits above, and apart from, politicians and the vulgar world of parliamentary politics. Former King Hassan II's decision in the late 1990s to pivot away from repression and toward greater incorporation of oppositional actors, however, set this practice of selective co-optation on a new, more aggressive trajectory. In the decades since, in order to maintain this cycle of co-optation and blame deflection—to sustain this vital maintenance work—the monarchy has been compelled to pursue the incorporation of a broader array of actors. Yet by doing so while continuing to publicly intervene in politics, the monarchy has eroded the ritualized separation that shields it from scrutiny and undermined the reproduction of its core justification for rule. In the next section I explore why ritualized separation between politics and rulers is especially important in authoritarian monarchies like Morocco's, and why one common practice for reinforcing this separation—the maintenance work of selective co-optation—can backfire in such contexts.

[9] *Interview 33*, January 2020.

3.3 Co-optation and maintenance work in monarchies and beyond

All rulers, Scott argues, seek to "[minimize] the chance their familiarity will breed contempt or, at least, diminish the impression their ritually managed appearances create" (12). But especially in what Herb (1999) terms "non-dynastic," authoritarian monarchies like Morocco, where the king ostensibly shares power with an elected parliament, maintaining ritualized separation between the institution of the monarchy and the broader political world is vitally important for the operation of legitimation. This is because in such contexts monarchs frequently justify their rule in terms similar to the Moroccan monarchy—that is, by claiming to be a neutral arbiter above the political fray who guarantees stability (Waterbury 1971; Herb 1999; Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002). It is important, in other words, to distinguish monarchies like Morocco and Jordan from those like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In the former, there are elected parliaments with meaningful, if constrained, avenues for political participation; in the latter, royal family members rule as a cohesive unit, and few avenues are provided for mass-based participation in political life. These differences map onto the kinds of legitimation claims these two types of regimes promulgate. In non-dynastic monarchies with elected parliaments and mass-based avenues for participation, monarchs legitimate their rule by claiming to serve as neutral arbiters; but in dynastic monarchies, legitimation claims vary. Thus while King Mohammed VI is portrayed as a neutral arbiter and legitimation is negatively impacted by his overt political involvement, Saudi Crown Prince and de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman's overt political involvement in his country's political affairs arguably comports with his broader legitimation strategy. In other words, not all

monarchies advance identical legitimation claims and, thus, the maintenance work needed to sustain legitimation across different monarchies varies.[10]

While the maintenance work necessary to reinforce legitimation varies across types of monarchies—and indeed, types of regimes—non-dynastic monarchies face a particularly onerous task in sustaining public appearances consistent with their public justifications. Claiming to serve as neutral arbiters above the drama and tumult of parliamentary politics, monarchs in Morocco, Jordan, and other similar contexts in practice *direct* the political show, not referee it. Thus they must rely on the maintenance work of legitimation to smooth over this hypocrisy, primarily through parliamentary liberalization and the selective incorporation of oppositional actors into regime institutions. When successful, this enables non-dynastic monarchs to continue to enjoy the trappings of near-absolute power while simultaneously satisfying popular demands for mass representation and sustaining public perceptions consistent with their justifications for rule. But as discussed in the previous section, this maintenance work can only conceal so much, for so long—and in non-dynastic monarchies, selective incorporation can break down over time as it turns parliamentary politics into "a cynical game" (Herb 1999, 264) and the distinction between the king and the unscrupulous politicians among whom he claims to mediate disintegrates. As Herb observes, "the parliament cannot be allowed to become merely a cynical game between palace and politicians" (1999, 264), because "when everyone recognizes that it is a game, they cease,

[10] Legitimation claims and associated maintenance work can vary across other types of regimes, too. For example, it might matter less for a king that he lives in an opulent palace than for the socialist party leader whose legitimation rests on personal asceticism and commitment to fighting inequality. Indeed, as Scott summarizes, "a divine king must act like a god, a warrior king like a brave general; an elected head of a republic must appear to respect the citizenry and their opinions; a judge must seem to venerate the law" (11).

or may cease, to think that the parliament provides a method of constraining the power of the elite—the monarch and party leaders alike" (224). Here, the historical experiences of many southern European monarchies, as well as Iraq and Egypt, are instructive. In those contexts, Herb suggests, controlled liberalization and selective incorporation failed to alleviate popular pressures for representation or shield the monarchy from popular blame, exposing monarchs as hypocrites, eroding their ritualized separation from politics, and contributing to regime collapse. In some cases this gave way to negotiated democratization, while in others only to other varieties of authoritarianism.

Of course, such outcomes are not inevitable for monarchies—indeed, Herb emphasizes the role of contingency and the individual choices of monarchs in these cases. Yet the risk that selective incorporation might disrupt the maintenance work of legitimation is particularly high for non-dynastic rulers given the difficulty of sustaining long-term a claim so starkly at odds with reality. In other words, to put this in the language of authoritarian reproduction strategies: co-optation can, over time, turn mass-based politics into a "cynical game," and in non-dynastic monarchies such developments threaten rulers' legitimation claims, exposing their hypocrisy and giving opponents an opening for launching legitimate critiques. Authoritarian reproduction strategies can, in short, break down endogenously over time, precipitating mass contention and prompting changes in how elites balance among co-optation, repression, and legitimation.

While Herb connects failures in parliamentary liberalization and selective co-optation to historical cases of legitimation breakdown in non-dynastic monarchies, he leaves the theoretical logic underlying this observation largely unexplored. In the next, and final section, I explain how co-optation is vulnerable to breakdown over time and

suggest that all types of regimes that rely on co-optation to sustain appearances consistent with their legitimation claims—that is, non-dynastic monarchies and other regimes where leaders claim to be neutral arbiters—are made vulnerable by breakdown.

3.4 How co-optation can break down over time

Canonical theories of authoritarian co-optation hold that the selective incorporation of key oppositional actors into regime-controlled institutions like parliament can serve as a "safety valve" for regimes by permitting some forms of authorized opposition and satisfying mass demands for representation. Co-optation thus aids regime reproduction by both providing circumscribed avenues for popular participation and giving would-be rivals a stake in the regime's survival while simultaneously neutralizing them as a potential threat to the incumbent. For example, Lust-Okar, writing on "structures of contestation" in Morocco, argues that incorporated political parties play an important role in "relieving popular frustrations" in part by satisfying masses' desire for greater representation in government (2005, 162; Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002). Co-optation also implicates its targets in unpopular regime decisions, helping deflect blame away from authoritarian incumbents and ensure that elected politicians bear the brunt of popular dissatisfaction (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002, 343).

But there is an underappreciated tension in this conventional wisdom about how co-optation operates under authoritarianism—a tension that can, over time, impede the ability of co-optation to shield incumbents from blame. The two propositions about co-optation mentioned above and commonly invoked in the literature—that it acts as a safety valve for popular pressure, and that it implicates targets in unpopular policies, deflecting

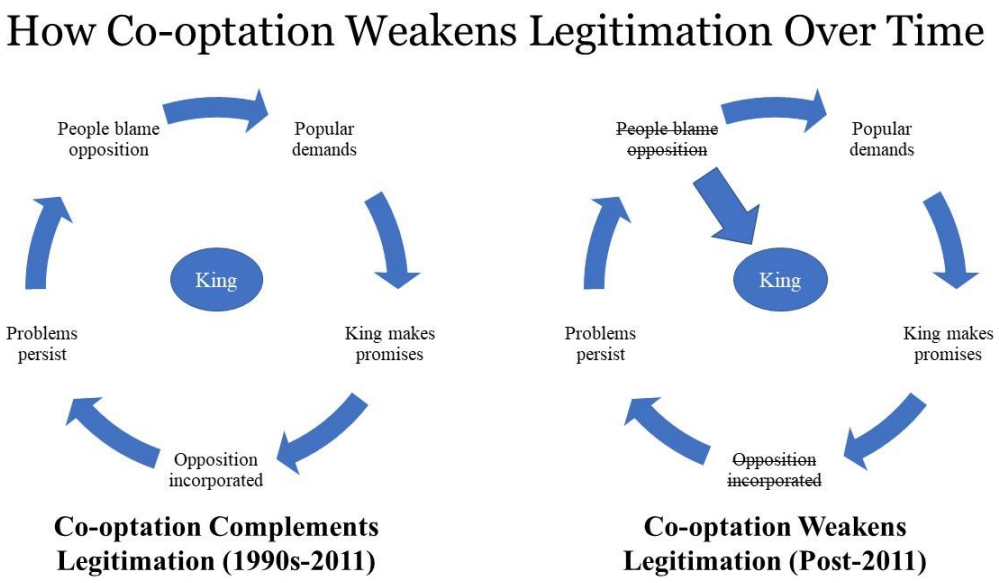
blame away from the leader—work against each other. Over time, the co-opted lose credibility because of their association with the regime, and with this loss of credibility they lose their ability to shield incumbents from blame for political problems. Indeed, writing on a co-opted leftist party in Egypt, the *NPUP*, Lust-Okar observes that "the very act of cooperation with the regime tarnished the opposition's legitimacy"; in general, she concludes, co-opted parties are viewed by the masses "at best, as limited forces for change and, at worst, as sycophantic stooges co-opted into supporting a corrupt regime" (2005, 86-87). Thus if co-optation is intended to serve as a mechanism for increasing the representation of ordinary citizens' voices in politics, in other words, citizens must actually *feel* represented—they must view co-opted parties or actors as credible, as independent and distinct from the regime. Yet the other theorized purpose of co-optation, blame deflection, directly undermines this goal in the long run, causing co-optation to become, in Fenner's words, a "victim of its own success" (41).

In regimes that rely on co-optation to sustain appearances consistent with their legitimation claims—that is, non-dynastic monarchies and other regimes where leaders claim to be neutral arbiters—co-optation becoming a "victim of its own success" (*ibid*) threatens the operation of legitimation and invites popular dissent. In Morocco, the increasing scope of co-optation in recent decades—the necessary maintenance work for sustaining perceptions of the monarchy's political neutrality—has come to envelop nearly all forms of organized opposition in the kingdom. Yet as this process saps co-opted actors of their credibility, it leaves them unable to either satisfy demands for popular representation *or* deflect blame away from the king. Indeed, while the last three

remaining "opposition" parties [11] in Morocco to be co-opted over the past two decades—the USFP, PI, and PJD—had mass bases of support, they have all seen their credibility and popularity fall markedly following their incorporation.[12] The image of the king as neutral arbiter has suffered as a result, spurring unprecedented criticism as opponents leverage the increasing exposure of the king's political interventions against him (see Figure 5 below). In other words, parliamentary politics—and politics more broadly—has become precisely the kind of "cynical game" Herb (1999, 234) warns is particularly threatening for monarchies, jeopardizing the ritualized separation between palace and politics, providing fodder for critics, and contributing to an explosion of norm-defying discourse that has undermined the monarchy's core justification for rule. One interlocutor described these dynamics well: "he [the king] has found himself naked and now doesn't have anyone who can protect him from his critics….they could be politicians, civil society activists—but there aren't any...he has destroyed them and [as a result] he has come into direct confrontation with the street and with public opinion."[13] And without credible future co-optation targets waiting in the wings who might be tapped to shoulder blame in the future, and thus jumpstart the process of co-optation and blame deflection so vital for the operation of legitimation, the monarchy has been forced to fall back on repression to contain rising dissent.

[11] Because affirming the king's political primacy is a prerequisite for party legalization in Morocco, the kingdom's oppositional parties are only oppositional in the sense that they are independent from the palace and seek to carve out an identity distinct from palace-aligned parties, often referred to as "administrative parties" by Moroccan commentators.
[12] While the PJD has been negatively impacted by incorporation, it still retains a mass base of support, unlike its predecessors. This is in part because of the party's outspoken, charismatic former leader Abdelilah Benkirane who vigorously defended the PJD's independence and credibility, even while largely implementing the regime's preferred policies (See Fenner and Snyder; see also Chapter 5).
[13] *Interview 47*, March 2020.

Figure 5



4. Contributions to the Literature on Authoritarian Stability

This chapter has sought to construct an alternative framework for studying the relationship between legitimation, ordinary citizens' perceptions, and the other two reproduction strategies authoritarian elites rely on to maintain power. In sum, this chapter makes several contributions to the literature on authoritarianism. First, it clarifies the unique logic of legitimation, arguing that it is the discursive, ideational-symbolic counterpart to the physical, coercive logic of repression and the redistributive logic of co-optation. While collectively all three strategies help autocrats maintain quiescence and retain power, each has a unique logic. Yet they are not independent: repression, co-optation, and legitimation can all complement *and* constrain each other. While this possibility has long been understood in the context of repression and legitimation, the potential for co-optation to harm legitimation has not been explored.

Second, while the literature on authoritarianism has come to accept that legitimation plays an important role in autocratic reproduction, it has not adequately explored the conditions under which legitimation may break down, and how breakdown impacts both public dissent and the other reproduction strategies authoritarian elites pursue. This chapter thus argues that legitimation claims are best understood as justifications for why a leader or regime has a right to rule, and that these claims impose public standards of performance on leaders. Rooted in discourse, legitimation claims are subject to ongoing struggle over their meaning, the obligations they are understood to impose on leaders, and the extent to which leaders' actual behavior comports with their public justifications. Expanding on Scott's work on the reproduction of relations of domination, this chapter thus illustrates how legitimation claims can be undermined by sustained and manifestly public hypocrisy on the part of the leader. Opponents can then leverage this hypocrisy against incumbents to levy "legitimate" critiques of hegemony, which threaten to appeal to wider swaths of society than other forms of critique, in part because they are grounded in the language of power. These developments compel elites to rebalance among co-optation, repression, and legitimation, which changes the texture of authoritarian politics—even if it doesn't lead to regime change.

Finally, in this chapter I have demonstrated that co-optation can, over time, break down endogenously, threatening the operation of legitimation in regimes where leaders justify their rule by claiming to serve as neutral arbiters above, and apart from, politics. While scholars have noted that selective incorporation and parliamentary liberalization in non-dynastic monarchies can over time cease to be effective in relieving mass demands for representation, the logic underlying these conclusions has not been fully explained,

nor have these conclusions been clearly related to the literature on authoritarian reproduction strategies. I thus argue that the primary ends co-optation serves—acting as a safety valve for popular pressure and deflecting blame away from incumbents—work against each other in the long run. In regimes that rely on co-optation to sustain appearances consistent with their legitimation claims, this can threaten the operation of legitimation and invite popular dissent, to which elites are compelled to respond with the largely coercive tools they have remaining. In other words, co-optation cannot be taken as exogenous to legitimation, and regime reproduction strategies can break down endogenously over time, prompting elites to rebalance among strategies.

CHAPTER THREE

From Independence to *Alternance*: Monarchical Power in Postcolonial Morocco

By the time Sultan Mohammed V returned to Morocco from exile in November 1955, colonial administrators were drawing up plans for decolonization while nationalists associated with *hizb al-Istiqlal*, or the Independence Party (PI), were hailing the imminent victory of the "revolution of the king and the people." In the preceding decades, Mohammed V had walked a tightrope between colonial authorities who relied on the monarchy to legitimate their occupation and the burgeoning nationalist movement which had sought to enlist the sultan and his symbolic cachet in their quest for independence. This balancing act came to an end in 1953 when French authorities, alarmed by the nationalists' escalating militancy, sent the sultan into exile. But instead of quieting nationalist fervor as officials had hoped, the sultan's exile deepened the independence crisis while bolstering his popularity and symbolic power. When formal independence was finally granted in 1956, now-King Mohammed V quickly went to work wielding his outsized popularity and image as nationalist champion to consolidate monarchical power. This came at the expense of the nationalists alongside whom he had previously rallied for independence, and who had hoped to relegate the king to a purely symbolic role in the country's postcolonial political system. Thus while many of his contemporaries in other newly-independent kingdoms were swept away by charismatic

leaders and revolutionary parties, Mohammed V prevailed, preserving the centuries-long reign of his *'alawi* dynasty.[1]

However, the postcolonial state Mohammed V inherited in 1956 was far different from the one his predecessor 'Abd al-Hafiz had signed away to the French in 1912 in the Treaty of Fez. While numerous dynasties had ruled over the territory now known as Morocco since the 8th century, never before had a Moroccan monarch wielded control over a modern state apparatus with the ability to exert power and enforce central authority across the full expanse of the kingdom. And while Mohammed V, like many of his predecessors, commanded traditional religious legitimacy from his claim to descent from the prophet, the contemporary postcolonial Moroccan state over which he now presided would demand a new legitimation formula. Thus multipartyism was constituted and a parliament was created to serve as a venue for managing and dividing rival political elites.

Over the coming decades and across 3 kings, as the monarchy sought to broaden its base of legitimacy, the relative centrality of religion in the regime's legitimation strategy would decrease, displaced by a growing emphasis on political pluralism and the nominally democratic institutions of parliament and semi-competitive elections. In the process, the palace began to cultivate an image as a neutral arbiter, above everyday politics and petty politicians. This project of political pluralism entered a decisive new phase in the 1990s when King Hassan II initiated a series of liberalizing reforms, culminating in his decision in 1997 to invite the long-time opposition parties of the *koutla dimoqratiyya* or "democratic bloc" (*koutla*) to form a government for the first time. When

[1] For more on the evolution of the monarchy's symbolic and political power in the period leading up to and immediately following independence, see Wyrtzen (2016).

his son Mohammed VI took the throne in 1999, he deepened this reform process, promising a "new concept of authority" and embracing the rhetoric of democratization and development.

This chapter's central argument is that this time period—which would later be dubbed *l'alternance*, or the alteration—marked a critical turning point in how the monarchy sought to manage its political opposition and legitimate its rule to ordinary people. This is for at least two reasons. First, the incorporation of the *koutla* into parliament signaled an important shift in how the regime used co-optation, becoming less about sidelining would-be coup-plotters and individual notables and more about incorporating—and then neutralizing—political parties with mass bases of support. Saddled with the burden of running government but without real powers, the newly-incorporated former opposition parties would absorb popular blame for governance failures while shielding the king from undue scrutiny. Second, Mohammed VI's self-presentation as a benevolent reformer helped further entrench the image of the king-as-arbiter that had slowly taken shape over the preceding decades while also tying more explicitly than ever before the popular legitimacy of the monarchy to the project of political pluralism and democratic development. This would prove enormously consequential in later years when ordinary Moroccans began using the king's own promises against him. Thus while the *koutla*-led government was short-lived and the promises of political reform proved largely superficial, the changes in popular expectations ushered in by the *alternance* period set the stage for the protests and direct criticism of the king that would emerge in the decades that followed. The changes in how

the regime managed its opposition, meanwhile, set the practice of co-optation on a new, more aggressive trajectory—one that would ultimately prove unsustainable.

***

Thematically, this chapter details how the Moroccan monarchy's contemporary legitimation strategy came into being in the decades following independence in 1956. Along with Chapter 5, it also analyzes one of two major rounds or period of co-optation and liberalization in postcolonial Morocco. Theoretically, this chapter establishes the image of the neutral arbiter as the key public standard of performance against which the monarchy would be evaluated going forward. While the monarchy was never apolitical, I show in this chapter that by turning to co-optation the monarchy was able to conceal its hypocrisy vis-à-vis its own public justification for rule. During this time, in other words, co-optation complemented legitimation, forming part of the necessary "maintenance work" that enabled the monarchy to perpetuate its image.

Though largely based on secondary sources, this chapter offers a novel interpretation of *alternance* and the changes in how the monarchy sought to legitimate its rule that preceded it by showing how this time period set the stage for subsequent co-optation efforts and, ultimately, the declining resonance of the monarchy's image as an apolitical arbiter. In other words, the central contribution of this chapter is to incorporate the *alternance* time period into a broader narrative about the cumulative impact of comprehensive co-optation on the monarchy's contemporary legitimation strategy.

In the first part of this chapter, I detail the lead-up to the *alternance* period, beginning with Hassan II's early efforts to incorporate the parties of the *koutla* in the late 1970s, after two decades of selective co-optation and brutal repression had transformed his political rivals into loyal oppositionists. While these early attempts to incorporate opposition and expand the regime's popular base of legitimacy were largely unsuccessful, the effort took on new urgency in the 1990s with the looming end of Hassan's rule and growing domestic and international scrutiny over the kingdom's human rights records. In part two, I analyze the *alternance* period itself and the key developments that shaped it, from the efforts to redress past human rights abuses and social exclusion, to the co-optation of the *koutla* and incorporation of other, former political opponents into other state-run bodies. I argue that these moves instilled hope in many ordinary Moroccans while raising their expectations and contributing to Mohammed VI's burgeoning image as a benevolent reformer.

Parts three and four analyze the end of the *alternance* period. Part three explores Morocco's brief experiment with press liberalization, which ended nearly as soon as it began. The regime's efforts to rein in critical journalists beginning in the late 1990s provided an early indication that the gestures toward reform that accompanied *alternance* were insincere. Finally, in part four I analyze the end of the *alternance* government and its consequences for Moroccan politics. Following elections in 2002, the king replaced the *koutla* with palace-aligned technocrats despite his professed commitment to democratic pluralism. Meanwhile, other promised reforms failed to materialize in the

years that followed. Despite these developments, I argue that the king's image emerged from this time period largely unscathed as ordinary Moroccans pinned the blame for unfulfilled promises and governance failures on the now-discredited former opposition. Their reputation tarnished, the parties of the *koutla* thus declined in relevance, leaving the newly-legalized islamist party, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), as the kingdom's only remaining credible opposition force.

1. Taming the Opposition and Embracing Limited Pluralism

While tensions between the palace and nationalists had been rising in the years immediately following independence in 1956, when Hassan II took the throne upon his father's death in 1961 the conflict escalated precipitously. In the coming decades, Hassan would pursue a campaign of relentless repression against his political foes as he consolidated monarchical power and dispatched with rivals who sought to usurp it. Throughout what would later be termed the "years of lead," the king oversaw systematic human rights violations, including forced disappearances, widespread torture, and arbitrary detention. The palace's primary antagonists in this protracted struggle were the nationalists in the Independence Party (PI) and the leftist National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP), which split from the former in 1959 and adopted a harder line vis-a-vis the monarchy. Alongside his repressive tactics Hassan also deployed the carrot, creating palace-friendly political parties that could serve as vehicles for distributing patronage to key elites while also competing with nationalist parties and diluting their strength. The end result was parliamentary deadlock, for which the palace pinned the blame on the

nationalists. Indeed, as Willis notes, at the time Hassan portrayed the opposition parties as an "impediment to the pressing problems of need and poverty" and even claimed that parliament "was actually at odds with true democracy" (2014, 69). Thus when riots broke out in Casablanca in 1965 over controversial education reforms, Hassan declared a state of emergency and used the violence as a pretext for suspending parliament altogether and ruling by decree. That same year, exiled UNFP leader Mehdi Ben Barka, who had grown increasingly strident in his opposition to the monarchy, was kidnapped and murdered in the streets of Paris in an operation widely suspected to have been orchestrated by the palace.

It would be more than a decade before some semblance of political stability returned to the kingdom, and during this time Hassan occupied an extremely precarious position. Although the state of emergency formally ended in 1970 when fresh parliamentary elections were held, the two primary opposition parties, the PI and UNFP, formed an alliance and boycotted the polls, along with a constitutional referendum promulgated by the palace that same year. Meanwhile, an attempted coup in 1971 by rogue army officers, and another in 1972 orchestrated by the king's right-hand-mand, Mohammed Oufkir, further underscored the monarchy's vulnerability to plots from within the ruling coalition. In the tumultuous years that followed, Hassan thus began strategizing for ways to put his rule on more secure footing.

The opportunity came in 1975 when Spain initiated the decolonization process in the Western Sahara, a territory it had occupied since the late 1800s and which Morocco claimed as its own—a cause that had long motivated many Moroccan nationalists. When the kingdom failed in its bid to win sovereignty over the territory outright, Hassan

engineered a massive, civilian-led march which saw hundreds of thousands of ordinary Moroccans bussed in from across the kingdom walk across the border unarmed, carrying with them pictures of the monarch and Moroccan flags. The gambit worked, Spain withdrew its forces and effectively greenlit Morocco's annexation of the territory. While this quickly led to war with the Sahrawi nationalist group known as the Polisario Front, Moroccan forces were able to successfully capture most of the territory relatively quickly. But most importantly for the monarchy, the so-called "Green March" and subsequent annexation of the Western Sahara enabled Hassan to placate potential detractors in the army while simultaneously outflanking his parliamentary opposition on an issue they had long championed.

Indeed, the Western Sahara conflict marked a major turning point in the decades-long struggle for political domination between the palace and its political opposition. As a result of the annexation, the UNFP split into a new party, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), while the kingdom's communist party split into the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). Along with the PI, both new parties quickly rallied behind the monarchy in support of the war effort and soon eclipsed their predecessors in size and relevance. This set the stage for the reintegration of the opposition into the formal political system and their return to participation in elections after more than a decade—all, essentially, on the palace's terms. In this way, the Western Sahara conflict and the years that followed marked the moment when the palace finally gained the decisive upper hand over its political opponents. After two decades marked by rampant repression, electoral boycotts, and states of emergency, "the [PI] and the USFP were reborn as the 'loyal opposition,' continuing to be critical of what they saw as the lack of democracy in

Morocco but no longer willing to confront the monarchy explicitly" (Willis 2014, 127). From this position of relative security, Hassan began to entertain the prospect of limited power sharing with his newly-transformed political opposition. By incorporating the parties of the so-called "nationalist bloc" into government, he hoped he could further tame his erstwhile rivals while expanding his regime's popular base of legitimacy. And following parliamentary elections in 1977, the opportunity came when PI agreed to enter into a governing coalition with the royalist parties. The USFP and PPS, for their part, remained in the opposition, but nonetheless participated in the elections.

The growing emphasis on what Sater terms "controlled pluralism" (2016, 58) in the years following the Western Sahara annexation marked the beginning of an important shift in how the monarchy managed its opposition and sought to legitimate its rule—a shift in strategy that would take another two decades before being fully realized. Up until that point, the struggle for political domination in postcolonial Morocco had largely been an intra-elite affair. In addition to repression, the monarchy relied on the selective co-optation of individual elites and patronage distribution to neutralize potential rivals. Royalist parties set up by the palace and its allies helped facilitate these goals while also preventing the nationalist parties from amassing too much power. The result was a system of what Waterbury (1970) famously called "segmentary politics" in which the king presided over a field of rival elites, pitting them against each other while ensuring none threatened his rule.

But there had been little effort on the part of the palace to appeal to ordinary Moroccans and, by the late 1970s, this was beginning to pose a problem. As Deneoux and Maghraoui argue, the regime was finding it "increasingly difficult to ensure political

loyalty through the distribution of spoils and patronage," in part because of the "growth of the urban middle class" and increasing demands for popular representation (1998, 104). And so with the nationalist parties newly tamed in the wake of the Western Sahara annexation, the palace began to explicitly embrace pluralism and limited power sharing as a means to broaden its base of legitimacy beyond its religious credentials.[2] "By leaving the prime minister and political parties the field of low politics," Sater explains, Hassan hoped to "strengthen his position as supreme arbiter" (2016, 71) while directing popular blame for governance failures toward the elected government, not the palace. Thus by the late 1970s, the image the monarchy relies on today to justify its rule and dodge blame—that of an apolitical arbiter above everyday politics and petty politicians—was beginning to take shape.

The palace's early experiment with power sharing, however, unraveled after only a few short years and the PI quickly returned to the ranks of the opposition where it eventually aligned itself once again with the USFP and the PPS. Yet none of the opposition parties in what would become the *koutla dimoqratiyya*, or "democratic bloc," (*koutla*) returned to the level of confrontation that had marked their political participation prior to the annexation of the Western Sahara. They remained, in other words, the loyal opposition, and throughout the 1980s Hassan continued unsuccessfully to pursue their full incorporation into government.

[2] It is important to note that the monarchy still claims religious legitimacy based in part on descent from the prophet and the king's title as "commander of the faithful." This is reflected in how the contemporary Moroccan state is structured, with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs remaining exclusively under the palace's purview even as other functions have been ceded, if only in name, to elected officials. However, as I demonstrate in this chapter, it is the image of the king as a neutral arbiter which emerged alongside Hassan II's tentative embrace of political pluralism that constitutes the heart of the palace's legitimation strategy today. I argue that it is this image—and not the image of the king as "commander of the faithful"—that has been negatively impacted by comprehensive co-optation.

This effort took on new urgency in the early 1990s when, facing growing international and domestic scrutiny over his human rights record and his own declining health, Hassan began to prepare for succession. Eager to complete the process of incorporating the opposition he began in the late 70s, and thus leave the throne in a more secure position for his son, the aging monarch took a number of steps to liberalize Moroccan political life and signal the credibility of his desire for meaningful power sharing. In 1990, he created the Advisory Council for Human Rights (CCDH) to which he appointed a number of prominent opposition elites, and later he closed Tazmamart, the secret desert prison where many of the regime's staunchest opponents had been sent (and where many perished). In 1992, he proposed constitutional changes that gave the Prime Minister the power to recommend ministers to the king. Meanwhile, the regime loosened restrictions on associational life and freedom of the press, which led to the creation of numerous new civil society organizations and independent media outlets. But perhaps most importantly for the *koutla*, Hassan introduced additional constitutional reforms in 1995 which created a bicameral legislature with an entirely directly elected lower chamber. While the upper chamber remained indirectly elected and had the same powers as the lower chamber, the *koutla* considered this a major concession and, for the first time since 1962, did not boycott the constitutional referendum (Sater 2016, 74). The desire for consensus between the palace and its parliamentary opposition began to strengthen and, with new elections scheduled for 1997, the opportunity for a deal was on the horizon.

The palace's efforts to woo the opposition finally paid off and, following a strong performance by the USFP in particular in the 1997 elections, the parties of the "democratic bloc" agreed to form a government. Hassan appointed USFP leader and

former political prisoner Abderrahmane Youssoufi as Prime Minister, while members of PI and PPS received other important cabinet appointments. Though the *koutla* had to form a coalition with a handful of palace parties in order to reach a majority, it was the first time all of the kingdom's major opposition parties would be leading a government together. And though in practice little had changed to reduce the palace's outsized political power, many in the *koutla* believed there was real space for reform and that the regime's pivot toward incorporation and political pluralism was sincere.[3] Indeed, the same year Hassan invited his long-time opposition to form a government, he also greenlit another important gesture toward pluralism: the legalization of the kingdom's first Islamist party. After years of attempting to distance themselves from the more radical *al-'adl wa al-iḥsān*, or the Justice and Charity Association (JCA), which vehemently opposed the monarchy, Islamists associated with the Movement for Reform and Renewal were allowed to compete in parliamentary elections as the Party of Justice and Development (PJD). Thus after more than three decades of rule, Hassan was finally taking real, if limited, steps to liberalize Moroccan political life and solidify the palace's popular image as an apolitical arbiter. In doing so, he left the monarchy in a much stronger position for his son—all without ever offering concessions that meaningfully reduced its powers.

2. Alternance and the "New Concept of Authority"

[3]As Willis writes, Youssoufi and other *koutla* members were initially wary of the prospect of incorporation but took Hassan's offer because "they believed that [his] reforms were genuine and, whilst not as far-reaching as they would have liked, represented a real opening that would only be expanded when the king was succeeded by his son" (2014, 142).

If Hassan's moves to incorporate the *koutla* and liberalize political life fostered the perception that democratic reform was in the offing, the changes Mohammed VI initiated after assuming the throne in July 1999 deepened this perception. At 35, the young monarch took a number of steps early on to distinguish himself from his father and signal a credible commitment to reform. Shortly after becoming king, Mohammed negotiated the return of one of his father's fiercest opponents, the former communist leader Abraham Serfaty, who endured years of torture in Moroccan prisons before being exiled in the early 1990s. He also invited the family of Mehdi Ben Barka to return to the kingdom, more than three decades after the former UNFP leader and socialist firebrand was forcibly disappeared at his father's behest. And in 2000 he released Abdesslam Yassine, leader of the banned islamist group JCA, after decades of house arrest.[4] Each of these moves helped Mohammed build an image as a benevolent reformer while also contributing to a "generalized atmosphere of political opening and reform" (Sater 2016, 83).

But perhaps the most important decision Mohammed took in his early days on the throne was to fire Driss Basri, the notorious interior minister who had presided over the worst of his father's abuses and whose ouster had long been demanded by the parties of the *koutla*. Indeed, the dismissal of Basri was an especially powerful signal to those in the opposition, as one outspoken leftist recounted:

[4] Yassine gained notoriety for an open letter he published in 1974 called "Islam or the Deluge" in which he accused Hassan of not being sufficiently Islamic. He was sent to a mental asylum as a result, and thereafter spent several decades under house arrest. The Justice and Charity Association (JCA), which he founded, has long been Morocco's most popular Islamist organization, but it remains illegal because of its overt opposition to the monarchy. However, the group and its activities have become more tolerated in recent decades.

> One of the most important messages the regime gave was when Mohammed VI took the throne, the first thing he did was fire Driss Basri.…He had participated in huge human rights violations. So what did the king do? He took the throne and fired him. For us it was like giving [a sign] that we really are in a new era (*ahd jadid*), that we're going to get out of this police state, this state that represses freedoms and everything.[5]

Mohammed thus wasted little time in trying to turn the page on his father's rule, and the initial steps he took to signal a "reconciliation between the king and the people"[6] earned him considerable amounts of goodwill, even from critics of the palace.

The new king's initial gestures towards pluralism and tolerance were accompanied by efforts to redress past human rights violations and social exclusion through new and existing state-run bodies. At the same time, however, Mohammed also hoped to use these bodies as alternative vehicles for the incorporation of former opposition figures and activists beyond parliament. In other words, the project of incorporating opposition into the regime extended far beyond simply inviting the parties of the *koutla* to form a government. For example, Mohammed appointed the highly-respected former political prisoner and activist Driss Benzerki as president of the Advisory Council for Human Rights (CCDH), while other prominent figures were tapped to serve in other positions on the council. Under Benzerki's leadership and with the backing of the new monarch, the CCDH would later oversee an historic truth and reconciliation process that awarded millions in damages to victims of abuse under Hassan

[5] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[6] *Interview 14*, October 2019.

II and their families. Though severely flawed[7], the truth commission—and Benzerki's appointment—helped deepen the promise of genuine reform that accompanied Mohammed's ascension to the throne. But it also ensured that a credible and once outspoken critic would now be contained within, and associated with, the regime.

The palace pursued a similar strategy with Amazigh rights activists. Through the creation of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) in 2001, Mohammed sought to signal a shift away from his father's draconian policies toward the Amazigh, whose languages had been outlawed and contributions to Moroccan culture systematically erased in the preceding decades. While the new institute had no policymaking power, it nonetheless enabled the monarchy to "[co-opt] the moderate, less politicized part of the Amazigh rights movement into a proto-governmental institution" (Sater 2016, 94). Ultimately, both the CCDH and IRCAM were just one part of a broader network of quasi-state institutions that the monarchy enlisted in its quest to sideline erstwhile critics while simultaneously appearing to take credible steps toward reform. After becoming king, Mohammed thus succeeded in broadening the process of incorporation that his father initiated before his death—so much so that, by the early 2000s, many of the most prominent figures once known for their fierce opposition to the palace had been incorporated into regime-controlled channels or otherwise sidelined.

In addition to completing the pivot toward greater incorporation started by his father, Mohammed also helped tie more explicitly than ever before the popular

[7] The *Instance Equité et Réconciliation*, or Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IER), was severely constrained in its mandate. The commission was only permitted to investigate abuses that occurred under Hassan II, systematically excluded claims by independence activists and their families from the occupied Western Sahara, and disallowed victims from naming their abusers. As a result, while millions in reparations were paid to thousands of individuals and their families, no one was held accountable for past abuses. More importantly, and despite the commission's recommendations, little has changed institutionally to prevent the recurrence of human rights violations.

legitimacy of the monarchy to the project of democratic and economic development. The new monarch promised to address rampant poverty, particularly in the long-neglected rural periphery, and travelled frequently to far-flung corners of the kingdom to inspect ongoing development projects or announce new ones. Many of the places he visited had never before hosted a royal visit, and his apparent concern for the plight of those living in poverty earned him the nickname "King of the Poor" in both the local and international presses. As one interlocutor recalled, at the beginning of his reign "he was always showing up at large and small events, even just a simple school opening. People saw the king working."[8] And when problems arose or projects were delayed, people "would blame the governor or a minister or a mayor"—and not the king.

Beyond his efforts to showcase his desire for inclusive economic development, Mohammed also went farther than his father ever did in embracing the rhetoric of democracy and political pluralism. In his first major speech as king, he promised to rule according to a "new concept of authority" that emphasized progressive democratization and respect for human rights. Key to this process, according to the king, were regular, competitive elections and strong, dynamic political parties. Taken together with his other gestures toward pluralism and reform, many thus believed a major political transformation was on the horizon. Indeed, as one long-time leftist remembered, "the whole country was full of hope" after Mohammed took the throne in 1999.[9] Another Amazigh activist noted that, at the time, it felt like the beginning of "a new Morocco, a new era: an era of freedom and democracy."[10] And given the new monarch's rhetoric and

[8] *Interview 45*, February 2020.
[9] *Interview 34*, January 2020.
[10] *Interview 14*, October 2019.

the actions he took after assuming the throne, "people had a lot of trust in him."[11] Against this backdrop, a growing cadre of independent journalists and editors were taking advantage of relaxed press laws to break taboos and test red lines, furthering the sense of political opening and contributing to what one interlocutor remembered as a "golden age" for freedom of expression.[12] In this context, as Sater explains, it was thus "not a large step to believe that Mohammed VI's accession to the throne might signify a devolution of power from the monarchy to elected government institutions"—and the start of a deeper process of democratization and reform (2016, 83).

To be sure, despite Mohammed's grandiose rhetoric and gestures toward pluralism, little had changed substantively to reduce the palace's preponderance of power in favor of parliament. If anything, the *koutla*-led government had even less power than it might have otherwise given the king's high-profile appointments to quasi-state institutions like the CCDH and IRCAM—bodies that answered to the palace, not parliament. Moreover, in the same speech in which he outlined his "new concept of authority," Mohammed also underscored the importance of retaining what he called an "executive monarchy" that could monitor elected officials and safeguard the national interest—a concept that is hard to square with contemporary understandings of democracy and popular sovereignty. But despite the fact it had little correspondence with reality, the rhetoric of democratization and political pluralism came to dominate royal and elite discourse under the new king. And while little had changed institutionally in terms of the exercise of power or the structure of the Moroccan economy, his increased emphasis on democracy and economic development worked to further entrench the image

[11] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[12] *Interview 32*, January 2020.

of the king as an apolitical arbiter that had begun to take shape under his father. Mohammed thus succeeded in increasing the extent to which the monarchy's popular legitimacy was based on political pluralism and democratic elections—even as he also, I argue, raised ordinary Moroccans' expectations.

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Before proceeding, it is important to note that despite Mohammed VI's increased emphasis on economic development and large-scale infrastructure projects, I do not argue that the Moroccan monarchy's contemporary legitimation strategy is reducible to simply delivering equitable economic growth. The image of the monarchy as neutral arbiter, which began to emerge under Hassan II and developed concurrently with the regime's embrace of limited pluralism and promises of liberalization, is broader than any narrower claims about economic performance. However the two are related: it is the claim to being a neutral arbiter—and the work of co-optation to perpetuate this claim—that keeps the king insulated from blame for governance failures, including the failure to deliver inclusive economic growth.[13] What has changed in recent years, as explained in the following chapters, is thus not that the monarchy stopped delivering equitable economic growth (it never truly did), but rather that comprehensive co-optation has left it exposed

[13] Also recall the discussion in Chapter 2, section 3 on the distinction some scholars make between "specific" and "diffuse" legitimacy, or what I have termed performance and ideological legitimacy. As I argue, claims about "what the regime 'actually is or represents'" (Gerschewski 2013, 20)—like a claim to serving as a neutral arbiter—are interdependent with claims about how the regime performs. For example, someone who believes the king is a neutral arbiter would be more likely to blame elected politicians and not the king for poor economic performance. One implication of this argument is that, had the regime not engaged in expansive co-optation, other political actors might have been able to redirect popular anger over unfulfilled promises of economic development away from the king

to blame for any number of governance failures, including economic ones. The primary variable driving increased criticism in other words is comprehensive co-optation, not changing economic performance.

3. Reining in the Independent Press

While there were many indications that the political opening that accompanied *alternance* and Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne would be fleeting, the regime's about-face on freedom of the press provided one of the earliest. The existence of a thriving independent press lent credibility to the image of a democratic reformer that Mohammed sought to cultivate, and journalists and editors quickly used their newfound leeway to test long-standing red lines around the monarchy, as well as Islam and the Western Sahara. But almost as quickly as the experiment with press liberalization began, the regime started to backtrack, using both the legal system and extralegal maneuvering to punish publications that went too far. These early efforts to restrict freedom of expression and rein in the independent press presaged the regime's broader pivot away from pluralism and tolerance which would unfold throughout the 2000s and mark the decisive end of the *alternance* period.

Morocco's first successful, truly independent publication was also among the first to discover the limits of the palace's apparent newfound tolerance for dissenting voices. Founded by businessman Aboubakr Jamaï in 1997, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* and its Arabic-language counterpart *Assahifa al-Ousbouiya* initially focused narrowly on topics related to business and finance. But Jamaï and his colleagues soon discovered that

accurately reporting on such subjects would require interrogation of the kingdom's broader political and economic system, and the publications quickly developed a reputation for high-quality journalism that was unafraid of broaching sensitive topics.[14] Indeed, setting a bold tone from the beginning, one of *Le Journal*'s first issues featured an interview with Malika Oufkir, the daughter of Mohammed Oufkir—mastermind of the failed 1972 coup attempt against Hassan II—who, along with the rest of her family, had been sent to prison following her father's summary execution.[15] Shortly afterwards, it published another controversial interview, this time with the former political prisoner and communist leader Abraham Serfaty and his wife, both of whom had recently returned to Morocco after years of exile in France.[16] And in 2000, *Le Journal* and *Assahifa* released a letter from 1974 by a Moroccan leftist implicating then-Prime Minister Youssoufi in the failed 1972 coup attempt.[17] Articles like these, along with others that discussed Morocco's occupation of the Western Sahara, exposed corruption among royal confidants, and criticized the palace's policies, broke new ground for their defiance of long-standing red lines. In the process, *Le Journal* and *Assahifa* blazed the trail for the other norm-busting independent publications that would emerge in the late 1990s and 2000s.

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[14] In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, former *Le Journal* editor Ali Amar described the evolution of the publication: "We realized in the first few weeks that we couldn't explain any of the economic and financial problems in this country without real social and political understanding and coverage. So we dug and dug, right down to the problems in governance itself." For more, see here: https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/02/morocco-draft-pioneer-of-independent-press-shut-over-debts-amid-censorship-suspicions-1.html

[15] *ibid.*

[16] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/16/the-crusader-2

[17] https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/02/morocco-draft-pioneer-of-independent-press-shut-over-debts-amid-censorship-suspicions-1.html

But the two publications' audacity also landed them in the crosshairs of the authorities who reacted swiftly to reassert red lines. Some issues that were deemed to go too far, like the one featuring the letter about the 1972 coup attempt, were censored outright. In other instances, the palace and its allies turned to the Moroccan legal system to win judgments against the publications for defamation, which saddled them with enormous amounts of debt and occasionally earned Jamaï and his colleagues jail time. In 2001, for example, Jamaï and his editor Ali Amar were ordered to pay $200,000 in damages for a story they published accusing Mohammed Benaissa, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs and an ally of the palace, of embezzling public funds.[18] Jamaï and Amar were also given two- and three-month jail sentences, respectively. By using the courts to silence critical journalists like Jamaï, the palace could retain plausible deniability for international audiences—despite the near complete lack of judicial independence in the Moroccan court system.

The king and his allies also resorted to extrajudicial measures to achieve their goals. For example, for two years Jamaï was forced to print his publications abroad and ship them to Morocco because local printers, responding to intimidation from the authorities, refused to do business with him.[19] And in 2009, upon returning to *Le Journal* and *Assahifa* after a four-year hiatus in protest against his mistreatment, Jamaï found it nearly impossible to sell ad space because of a palace-orchestrated[20] advertising

[18] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1197479.stm
[19] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/16/the-crusader-2
[20] The king, through his private holding company *Siger*, has interests in nearly every facet of the Moroccan economy. This, combined with the palace's extensive connections to the broader business community, gives the king enormous sway over Moroccan advertisers.

boycott.[21] This, along with years of accumulated debt from defamation suits, proved to be the final blow for Jamaï and his path-breaking publications, and in 2010 they were permanently shuttered.

Though they were the first, *Le Journal* and *Assahifa* were not the only independent publications to test red lines in the 1990s and 2000s—nor were they alone in facing the consequences. Indeed, the same combination of legal and extralegal tools deployed against Jamaï's publications would be reprised against other independent media outlets and critical journalists. Another prominent target of the regime's ire was Ali Lmrabet, whose satirical weekly *Demain* was once described by *Newsweek* as "North Africa's answer to *Charlie Hebdo*."[22] Just three years after launching, *Demain* was ordered shut in 2003 and Lmrabet given three years in prison for publishing an interview with an outspoken critic of the king's policies vis-a-vis the Western Sahara, as well as multiple cartoons ridiculing the monarchy.[23] One of the cartoons, which were drawn by Khalid Gueddar, drew attention to the size of the royal budget, while another chronicled the "history of slavery," which culminated in a drawing depicting people bowing down to a giant, Moroccan-style slipper[24]—a not-so-subtle reference to the king and the *bay'a*, or allegiance ceremony, that takes place every year. And in 2005, Lmrabet was fined and barred from practicing journalism in Morocco for a decade after referring to the Sahrawi

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[21] https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&t=&sort=YMD_date%3AD&page=1&maxresults=20&f=advanced&val-base-0=Aboubakr%20Jamai&fld-base-0=alltext&docref=news/14796664EEC098F0

[22] https://www.newsweek.com/north-africas-chief-satirist-battles-keep-residency-permit-327595

[23] https://cpj.org/2005/04/journalist-forbidden-to-report-for-10-years/

[24] Field Notes, February 2020. Some of Gueddar's other cartoons are archived on his now-inactive blog: http://khalidcartoons.blogspot.com/. However, in recent years Gueddar has taken a softer line toward the monarchy. In 2020 he began working at *Le360*, a media outlet closely aligned with the palace which is frequently used as a vehicle for defaming critics. For more, see: https://fr.le360.ma/societe/loeil-de-gueddar-le-temps-vole-par-le-coronavirus-218889?fbclid=IwAR0bBoVuQgmhhaUSoKo8cmw-AOcNt5yVlJ_Xt8S5JgznO659AkQf_nFOOuM

people living in the Algerian city of Tindouf as refugees in an article for the Spanish daily *El Mundo*, a position at odds with Morocco's official claim that they are prisoners of the Polisario Front.[25] Though Lmrabet's ban expired in 2015, his attempts to restart his journalism career in the kingdom have been foiled by the authorities, who have refused to renew his residency card—allegedly on orders from the palace.[26] Like Jamaï, Lmrabet thus found himself forced out of the profession, worn down and financially strained after being the target of relentless legal harassment and behind-the-scenes maneuvering.

Despite the regime's escalating campaign against its detractors in the independent press, throughout the 2000s other critical journalists continued trying to push red lines, though they ultimately found themselves victims of the same strategies that befell Jamaï and Lmrabet. One of the most popular independent publications in Morocco—and the only one from the era still in print today, albeit under different ownership—was *Tel-Quel* and its Arabic-language counterpart *Nichan*, which broke new ground in part because of its use of Moroccan Arabic, or *darija*.[27] Founded by Ahmed Benchemsi, who today serves as a director for Human Rights Watch, *Tel-Quel* and *Nichan* became sensations in Morocco for their willingness to break taboos, not only about the monarchy, but also about other topics deemed off-limits like sex and religion. But like those that preceded him, Benchemsi also faced repercussions for running afoul of red lines. Shortly after writing an editorial criticizing the king's communication skills in 2005, he was hit with a pair of unrelated defamation suits that quickly led to over $200,000 in damages—an

[25] https://cpj.org/2005/04/journalist-forbidden-to-report-for-10-years/; see also: https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/04/25/AR2005042501591.html
[26] https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2015/07/he-is-denied-his-right-to-an-identity-why-a-moroccan-satirist-is-on-hunger-strike/
[27] Moroccan Arabic is distinct from Modern Standard Arabic, which is more formal and less widely-understood. *Nichan*, by virtue of being in *darija*, thus managed to reach a bigger, non-elite audience.

amount much higher than usual.[28] In 2007, another editorial critical of the king sent him to jail for *lèse-majesté* for several months.[29] However, what ultimately brought an end to *Tel-Quel* and *Nichan*—and drove Benchemsi out of journalism—was an unprecedented opinion poll about the king published in 2009 on the tenth anniversary of his ascension to the throne. Carried out in collaboration with the French daily *Le Monde*, the representative survey was the first of its kind to ask direct questions about the king. And though the results were overwhelmingly positive—with the monarch earning a 91% approval rating—the reaction by authorities was swift. Copies of the issue were seized and the publications temporarily suspended.[30] And when Benchemsi tried to restart them, an advertising boycott quickly stymied his plans.[31] Shortly thereafter, he closed *Nichan* and sold *Tel-Quel* to a new investor who overhauled the magazine and its confrontational editorial line—silencing yet another prominent critic and further confirming the end of the kingdom's brief experiment with press liberalization.

By the end of the 2000s, Morocco's once vibrant independent press was thus on life support. It was now clear that the palace's apparent embrace of freedom of the press—like its gestures toward democratic reform—had been nothing more than an insincere ploy to create a false sense of political opening. The palace then took advantage of this broader environment of hope to incorporate and sideline its longtime political opposition. But as soon as the press started using its newfound leeway to test red lines, particularly around the monarchy, the palace and its allies worked assiduously to claw

[28] https://cpj.org/reports/2007/07/moroccoweb/
[29] https://rsf.org/en/news/newspaper-editors-trial-adjourned-again
[30] https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/08/03/maroc-le-sondage-interdit_1225217_3212.html
[31] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/10/moroccos-largest-arabic-newsweekly-to-fold-under-state-pressure/63921/

back control. Though they were successful in silencing some of the most critical journalists and closing their publications, the monarchy had nonetheless been opened up to public scrutiny in a way like never before. To be sure, even at its zenith, the independent press only ever reached a narrow, largely-elite audience. But the efforts of figures like Jamaï, Lmrabet, Benchemsi, and others to test red lines and turn the king and his policies into legitimate topics of debate ultimately helped pave the way for the unprecedented wave of criticism of the king from ordinary citizens that would emerge in the following decade.

4. Closing the Window: the End of Alternance and the Return of Technocrats and Palace Parties[32]

Though the palace's lack of sincerity with regards to press liberalization became apparent as soon as journalists began defying red lines, it would take somewhat longer before the true nature of its commitment to political pluralism and power sharing would be revealed. Indeed, though the *koutla*-led government proved unable to advance its democratic reform agenda, the parties of the former opposition nonetheless worked with the palace to implement new laws that improved the kingdom's social safety net, if only modestly. Prime Minister Youssoufi, meanwhile, assured voters that his government was working hard to make future elections free and fair. But Youssoufi also failed to

[32] This chapter's discussion of the *alternance* government and the parties of the *koutla* focuses mostly on the USFP and PPS, both of which were affected more by the experience of incorporation than the PI, in part because of the latter's previous stint in government in the late 1970s. In other words, the USFP and PPS had farther to fall in terms of popular perceptions than the PI, which did not have the same reputation and activist base of support as its leftist coalition partners when it entered government in 1997.

condemn the regime's crackdown on the independent press and helped pass IMF-backed economic reforms supported by the palace. These moves divided members of his party, including some parliamentarians who thought the government wasn't doing enough to confront the palace over its political prerogatives.[33] Their concerns proved to be warranted when, following the 2002 elections, the king replaced Youssoufi and the *koutla*-led government with a technocratic one headed by interior minister and ally of the palace Driss Jettou. While the USFP remained the largest party in parliament, and the *koutla* saw its overall share of seats increase, the king no longer felt compelled to stick with the power sharing formula devised by his father.

By 2002 it thus seemed that the window opened by Hassan in the latter days of his rule had now been closed, and that the regime was returning to its old ways. Mohammed's appointment of Jettou to the premiership was a shock for many political observers, and Sater describes it as his "first major controversial move" (2016, 86). Yet many in the *koutla* still believed that the king's initial gestures toward democratization were genuine and that they might ultimately prevail in their bid to wrestle some power from the monarchy. Thus the *koutla* opted to remain in government and work alongside the technocrats appointed by the king, despite being forced to assume a diminished role. Popular perceptions, however, were not on the erstwhile opposition's side. Ordinary Moroccans soon soured on the parties of the *koutla*, whose inability to advance substantive reforms and continued participation in government sapped them of their credibility and relevance. Indeed, as Willis observes, the parties' decision to remain in government following the 2002 elections "[encouraged] popular perceptions that the

[33] For more on the *Alternance* government's achievements and controversies, and former Prime Minister Youssoufi's legacy, see here: https://mipa.institute/7932

former critics of the government had been thoroughly co-opted and sought only to hold onto their plush offices and ministerial limousines for their own personal benefit" (2014, 143). A reputation earned over nearly a half century of repression and resistance was thus depleted after only five years. This left the parties of the *koutla* little different in the popular imagination from the artificial palace parties and political opportunists they had spent decades battling.

Discontent with the USFP in particular extended into the ranks of its activist base, prompting an exodus on the part of many of its most left-wing members. One activist, a self-described "child of the USFP" whose parents had deep ties to the party, left for good in the aftermath of the *alternance* government. Like others outside the party, he initially had a lot of hope that the experiment would be successful, but faulted party leaders for squandering the opportunity to force the palace's hand:

> I had hope at that time that it could work. And the USFP did achieve some gains, but the elites and leadership in the party didn't have plans that put pressure on the king at the time—both Hassan II and Mohammed VI—to share power….So I had hoped *alternance* would achieve some progress, but it didn't. We weren't able to get concessions from the king concerning his powers [because] party leadership didn't have a clear political project and just wanted to be in power."[34]

Another interlocutor sympathetic to the USFP's politics also laid blame on party leadership but argued that the power sharing agreement was doomed from the beginning.

[34] *Interview 30*, January 2020.

The parties of the *koutla* were saddled with "unpopular reforms," he argued, in order to "tarnish their reputations" —as if to say, "see, these are the leftists" (*ha homa al-ysariyyin*).[35] Thus, for astute observers, the decline in popularity of the *koutla* after the *alternance* government, and the subsequent return of technocratic rule, confirmed the true nature of the palace's commitment to political pluralism: incorporating the opposition not to share power with them, but to weaken their reputations while shielding the palace from blame for governance failures.

Many members of the *koutla* had indeed worried about such an outcome. As Willis notes, "the opposition parties were initially wary of the palace's invitation to join the government coalition of parties, fearing that it was a trap that would simply co-opt and de-fang their criticism of the regime" (2014, 141). After their stint in government, many in the *koutla* "began to fear that *alternance* had indeed been a deliberate trap designed to shoulder them publicly with the blame for the failings of the Moroccan state and so undermine their credibility and thus their support amongst the electorate" (143). Unfortunately for the *koutla*, this plan largely succeeded. Despite Hassan II's and Mohammed VI's gestures toward democratic and economic reform, after five years of ostensible power sharing with their long-time rivals and little progress toward promised reforms, it was the former opposition that received the lion's share of the popular blame.

It was from this place of relative security that the palace felt more comfortable returning to some of the practices that had defined Moroccan political life prior to *alternance* and the tentative opening of the 1990s. For example, the regime's harsh response to a string of deadly terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003 indicated that

[35] *Interview 12*, October 2019.

the coercive apparatus responsible for the worst abuses of the "years of lead" remained intact and largely unaccountable, except to the palace. Empowered by a draconian new anti-terrorism law forced through parliament in the weeks following the attacks, the regime initiated a wide-ranging crackdown on islamist groups in the kingdom that swept up thousands and saw the return of allegations of arbitrary detention, widespread torture, and forced confessions.[36] In the years and decades since, the same laws have been instrumentalized to pursue outspoken journalists, activists, and other figures whose opposition to the palace or its policies have marked them as a threat.[37] Islamist groups, meanwhile, remain the target of routine police harassment and surveillance. Thus, along with the efforts to silence independent journalists and media outlets detailed in the previous section, the heavy-handed, anti-terrorism crackdown further dampened the possibility of genuine liberalization.

The 2000s also saw a return of another practice many had hoped had ended with *alternance* and Mohammed VI's "new concept of authority": creating royalist shell parties that serve as vehicles for co-opting individual elite while also ensuring parliament remains acquiescent to the palace. In 2007, royal adviser and childhood friend of the king's Fouad Ali el-Himma founded the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), which almost overnight became the largest group in parliament as opportunistic politicians defected to join the "party of the king's friend."[38] The party's subsequent first-

[36] For more, see *Human Rights Watch*'s 2004 country report on Morocco, and in particular the section entitled "Human Rights After the Casablanca Bombings." https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/morocco1004/4.htm

[37] For an example of how authorities have used anti-terrorism laws to pursue critics in the media, see the following *Amnesty International* report on journalist Ali Anouzla: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/05/morocco-stop-using-terrorism-pretext-imprison-journalists/

[38] For more on the PAM, its founder, and the party's meteoric rise, see: https://carnegie-mec.org/2009/07/28/morocco-emergence-of-new-palace-party-pub-23426

place finish in the 2009 municipal elections confirmed it would play a major role in the kingdom's politics post-*alternance*—a development that proved concerning even for some regime apologists. Indeed, while so-called palace parties, or "administrative parties" (*aḥzab idariyya*) in Moroccan Arabic, had long been a feature of Moroccan politics, the PAM's rapid ascent alarmed some political elite who feared the prospect of single-party rule. One interlocutor, an outspoken leftist who maintains ties to more conservative and traditional pro-monarchy politicians, described a collective anxiety that "the regime was trying to create a system like Ben Ali's in Tunisia," where the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party dominated political life up until Ali's ouster in 2011.[39] Even still, PAM successfully lured many prominent leftists to join its ranks, as well as a new generation of entrepreneurs and civil society leaders who, as Sater writes, "[had] sought, since the 1990s, a role in politics" (2016, 90). Thus after spending the first few years of his reign incorporating and ensuring the neutralization of his long-time parliamentary opposition, Mohammed turned in the second decade of his rule to the task of giving the kingdom's emerging civil society and entrepreneurial elites a stake in the regime.

In addition to serving as a vehicle for the co-optation of a new generation of political elites, the PAM was also intended to serve as a bulwark against the growing popularity of the Islamist PJD, which was now the kingdom's only remaining opposition party. Indeed, as Willis details, after the incorporation and subsequent neutralization of the parties of the *koutla*, which "brought to an end the party-political system that had operated since the early 1960s," it was the PJD that became "the new face of the

[39] *Interview 21*, July 2019.

Moroccan opposition and the effective inheritor of the [*koutla*'s] historic mantle" (2014, 144). The palace has long had an antagonistic relationship with Morocco's islamist currents, despite at times reconciling with particular groups in order to balance against the leftists.[40] While the PJD had worked hard to allay the palace's concerns, even limiting the number of seats it contested in elections in the wake of the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the party's electoral performance since it was legalized in the late 1990s was a source of concern for many regime elites. The PJD earned 42 seats in parliament in the 2002 elections, for example—a performance bested only by the USFP and PI. And by 2007, the party had become the second largest in parliament. Yet the PAM would face an uphill battle in trying to prevent the PJD from winning more seats in parliament. Unlike the palace parties, the PJD relied on grassroots mobilization, not patronage, to turn out voters. And with a level of credibility and popular base of support unmatched by any other major political party, the palace would soon find that there was a limit to what it could do to stop the PJD's rise.

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By the end of the 2000s, Moroccan politics had undergone a massive transformation. Over the preceding two decades, the palace had successfully incorporated its long-time political opposition, turning once-fierce and credible critics into regime collaborators and,

[40]The palace's often-tumultuous relationship with Morocco's Islamist currents should not be read as an indication the monarchy repudiates religion as a source of legitimacy. Indeed, the king remains "commander of the faithful" and retains absolute control over religious affairs inside the kingdom. Yet as I demonstrate in chapter 3, the centrality of religion in the regime's legitimation strategy was gradually displaced by a growing emphasis on political pluralism beginning in the 1970s. The monarchy's religious credentials nonetheless remain important, even if they are not, as I argue, central to how the monarchy justifies its *political* role in contemporary Morocco.

in popular perceptions, sell-outs. In the process, Hassan II and Mohammed VI managed to further entrench the image of the monarch-as-arbiter which had come to occupy a central place in the palace's legitimation strategy. The monarchy had thus seemingly landed on a winning strategy that enabled it to preserve its near-absolute power while simultaneously evincing a commitment to political pluralism. This strategy, which Hassan first began pursuing in the late 1970s, and which finally came to fruition in the 1990s, had been successful in strengthening the monarchy's popular base of legitimacy.

Yet these moves also increased the expectations of ordinary Moroccans and set a public standard of performance against which the monarchy would be judged: serving as a neutral arbiter above everyday politics and petty politicians. Ensuring the continued resonance of this image would be crucial for the success of the monarchy's legitimation strategy. However, with few credible opposition groups remaining—save the islamists of the PJD—recreating the conditions that led to *alternance* and enabled the palace to dodge blame for governance failures and unfilled promises would prove exceedingly difficult. And while, by the end of the 2000s, many of the kingdom's most prominent independent publications and journalists had been silenced, the monarchy had nonetheless been opened up to public scrutiny by ordinary people in a way like never before. With the growing popularity and reach of the internet, Mohammed VI was thus left vulnerable to changing popular perceptions of his rule.

CHAPTER FOUR

Putting the Palace on the Defensive: The February 20th Movement and Rising Politicization

In September 2008, 18-year-old Yassine Belassal was arrested and sentenced to 12 months in prison for writing "God, country, Barça" on a school blackboard, referencing the popular Barcelona-based professional soccer team while riffing on Morocco's official motto, "God, country, king." Belassal's teacher in Ait Ourir, near Marrakech, reported him to the police. Morocco's private press—itself bucking under years of increasing restrictions on freedom of speech—helped draw attention to the case, highlighting the severity of the punishment for a teenager who, it seemed, did not know any better. "My son doesn't understand politics," his father told *Hespress*, while his grandfather pleaded for royal intervention: "if our son made a serious mistake, and the king wants to do good for his people and his country, we hope he will grant him a pardon."[41] The private press was joined in their efforts by a budding blogosphere, which had already that year come to the defense of others arrested for *lèse-majesté*, drawing attention to their cases and helping generate public outcry. The online furor even caught the attention of FC Barcelona itself, which announced it would appoint a lawyer to investigate whether it could intervene to help the teenager. In the end, the public attention

[41] https://www.hespress.com/%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B0-%D8%A8%D9%84-12237.html

and criticism that followed Belassal's arrest led the court to suspend his sentence and spare him from prison on appeal—though his conviction was not overturned.

Belassal may have only been joking, but Moroccan rapper Mouad Belghouat—better known as *Lhaqed*, or the indignant[42]—was not when he released his breakout hit "No More Silence" less than 3 years later as the wave of protests sweeping the MENA region reached Morocco. In addition to denouncing the king's economic predation, the song[43] stirred controversy for again altering the kingdom's official motto, substituting "freedom" for "King" in one of its verses. The song went viral, becoming something of a rallying cry for many who joined Morocco's February 20th Movement, of which Belghouat was an early and vocal supporter. Like Tunisian rapper *El General*'s "President of the Country," Belghouat's song impugned the legitimacy of an unaccountable leader, exhorting ordinary people to speak up and mobilize for their rights. And, as elsewhere in the region at the time, critics were using YouTube, Facebook, and other digital networking tools to reach fellow citizens, evading censors. When Belghouat was arrested for insulting the monarchy, his defenders took to the streets and online to defend his right to free speech.

The Moroccan regime's ability to exert centralized control over media and the means of symbolic production had been waning in the years prior to 2011 as pioneering publications like *Le Journal* and *Tel-Quel* took advantage of partial liberalization to test red lines. Yet the February 20th Movement brought this waning ability into sharp relief

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[42] Belghouat's stage name is sometimes written "l7a9ed." This informal style of writing is common online and in text messages across the Arabic-speaking world and uses a combination of Latin letters and numbers to render Arabic text.
 is common in the Arabic-speaking world, particularly on the internet and in text messages.
[43] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKDQaRjvSzM&ab_channel=l7a9d

as digital networking tools radically altered the playing field—and with it, the dynamics of legitimation and popular contestation. Both Belassal's seemingly innocent substitution of his favorite soccer club for the king, and Belghouat's more political statement, showed how easily subversive messages could spread online, and how quickly supporters could be rallied to defend the principles of freedom of speech. In this rapidly changing environment, both the kingdom's motto—emblazoned on hillsides, printed on banknotes, and recited by school children—and the monarchy's place within it, were becoming fodder for quotidian banter and popular contention. No longer, it seemed, could the regime count on the language, rituals, and political practices like co-optation associated with legitimation to keep the king insulated from popular scrutiny and political blame.

The incidents described at the outset of this chapter also speak to a broader process underway since Hassan II first began to embrace political pluralism and consolidate the monarchy's image as a neutral arbiter: rising expectations and decreasing returns to co-optation. After the co-optation of the long-time opposition and partial liberalization then subsequent reversals, the king was beginning to pay the price, unable to escape the expectations laid on him by repeated promises of reform and his justification for rule as an apolitical force for good in the country. Digital networking tools only accelerated this process—and with explosive effects in early 2011 when large-scale protests swept the kingdom.

This chapter argues that the 2011 protests represented a critical inflection point in Mohammed VI's reign, forcing the king to renew once again promises of democratic reform and political pluralism in order to safeguard his image as a neutral arbiter. The monarch who took the throne promising a "new concept of authority" was presented with

a final opportunity to live up to his justification for rule as an apolitical arbiter committed to democratic reform and respect for the independence of political institutions. While the king's swift promises of reform helped demobilize protesters and restore faith in this image, I argue that this was only temporary—in part because of the changes in Moroccan society the protest movement helped catalyze. After witnessing the power of protest to extract concessions from the palace, many Moroccans lost their fear of political action and protest, including those who never joined the movement. Ordinary people began following political developments in the kingdom more closely, aided by digital networking tools that expanded access to information and narratives that countered official ones. The king's renewed promises of reform, meanwhile, increased their expectations. Collectively, I argue these developments put the monarchy under a microscope and on the defensive in a way it had never been before—paving the way for the wave of unprecedented, direct criticism that would emerge in the years that followed.

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Thematically, while Chapter 3 examined the first of two major periods of co-optation and promises of liberalization followed by subsequent restrictions and reversals, this chapter focuses on the first major protest movement to emerge in Morocco post-*alternance*. The protests forced the king to renew promises of liberalization first made in the latter days of his father's rule and, as we will see in Chapter 5, to turn once again to co-optation in a bid to fortify the monarchy's image as a neutral arbiter. Theoretically, this chapter demonstrates how the monarchy's legitimation strategy structured how some activists and

protesters calibrated their demands. Even as some like Belghouat subverted the language of legitimation and rejected the king outright, most sought to appeal to the monarchy's own standards in their calls for a "king who reigns but doesn't rule"—the kind of "[critique] within hegemony" that "[calls] upon the elite to take its own rhetoric seriously" (Scott 1990, 106-7) described in Chapter 2. The increased politicization and engagement that followed the protests, meanwhile, made it easier for citizens to monitor the monarchy's performance vis-à-vis his promises and public justification for rule.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. In the first, I examine the protest movement itself, detailing the tenuous cross-ideological alliances that propelled it and the tactics deployed by the palace to weaken and divide it. In the second, I analyze the content of protesters' messages, illustrating how activists converged around a set of demands that called on the king to hew more closely to his self-presentation as an apolitical arbiter—even as others harbored more radical demands. The third section explores how the protest movement facilitated a wide-ranging national dialogue around the monarchy's political powers, facilitated in part by social media and citizen-journalists who offered a counter narrative to the palace's. Finally, I detail the lasting impact the February 20th Movement had on protest activity and political engagement more broadly among ordinary Moroccans.

1. Morocco's Protest Movement

In January 2011, three young Moroccans from Meknes created a Facebook group called "Moroccans debate the king." They had no real background in politics or activism

but were inspired by demonstrations sweeping the region—and frustrated that Morocco's major political currents had not yet organized any demonstrations or articulated any demands. They soon renamed their group the "Movement for freedom and democracy now," called for Moroccans across the country to demonstrate the following month, and wrote a list of demands, including a new constitution that would "return the monarchy to its natural size" (Bennani-Chraïbi and Jeghllaly 2012, 113). Within weeks, as the group steadily attracted followers—and regime sympathizers began attacking the organizers as Polisario supporters[44]—more experienced hands sprang into motion. Activists affiliated with the *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains*, or Moroccan Human Rights Association (AMDH), offered their Rabat headquarters as a space for organizers and, along with other familiar faces of the Moroccan left, they went to work strategizing where to protest, which slogans to shout, and what demands to articulate. It was there that a viral video calling on Moroccans to protest was produced.[45] And as Facebook groups supporting the planned protests multiplied, other groups quickly jumped onboard. On February 16th, the banned Islamist group, the Justice and Charity Association (JCA)—known for their ability to mobilize large numbers—announced their intent to participate in the protests. They were soon joined by the more reform-oriented youth wings of several political parties, some in defiance of their senior leadership. To accommodate these ideologically diverse currents, demands were altered and limits on slogans imposed. Gone were the explicit references to the monarchy; instead protesters would call for a

[44] Originally, organizers inadvertently scheduled the first protests for the anniversary of the Polisario Front's founding, which prompted harsh criticism from the regime-aligned press. The date was subsequently changed to February 20th. Even had organizers not made this mistake, accusing protesters and other dissidents of harboring sympathy for the Polisario or Morocco's neighbor and frequently nemesis Algeria is a common regime tactic.

[45] https://globalvoices.org/2011/02/19/morocco-i-am-moroccan-and-i-will-take-part/

"democratic constitution" (Vairel 2014, 306-8). On the eve of the protests, it was thus clear that what had started as an idea among friends in a cyber-cafe in Meknes had quickly been overwhelmed by "the force of things on the ground."[46]

The turnout across the kingdom the next day surprised many, including the experienced activists and party organizers who soon also found themselves overwhelmed—their carefully negotiated demands and restrictions on slogans and tactics tested by both the rapid pace of events and new protesters not keen to follow orders. One interlocutor recalled attending the protests and being told by organizers at the end of the day, "that's it, go home," only for the crowd to insist on staying.[47] Another lamented the "paternalistic" attitude of some of the more experienced activists whose control over messaging and tactics ultimately alienated many to traditional organizing structures.[48] Explaining tactics, one old-guard leftist explained why he and others imposed restrictions:

> We told them we need to be patient and not expect that change is going to come tomorrow…So, don't go to the working class [neighborhoods]….let's leave them alone and let's go to the streets that want it, that accept the idea of February 20th– they will come to the march, not the march comes to them. And, don't have weekly marches. For example, let's do it once a month so people don't get tired. They're going to get tired; activists always get tired.[49]

[46] *Interview B*, October 2019.
[47] *Interview 31*, January 2020.
[48] *Interview 5*, September 2019.
[49] *Interview 20*, November 2019.

Yet many others bristled at directives such as these, which deepened internal divisions. Critiquing activists from the parties as "old fashioned," one younger participant argued that "they just do the work like they've always done" without reevaluating their approach.[50] Another noted that, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, protesters in Morocco never continuously occupied a "central, symbolic location" because the main groups involved in planning protests "purposefully limit themselves."[51] As a result of tactics like these, in the view of many younger activists, the protest movement achieved less than it might have otherwise.

Yet despite internal disputes over tactics and slogans, the protest movement—which became the largest nationwide mobilization in a generation, with protests in over 50 cities and towns—demonstrated it had the power to "make the throne shake."[52] Within a matter of weeks, the king, whose public appearances are tightly choreographed and who only speaks at regularized intervals during national holidays, gave an unprecedented speech to his people. In what came to be known in official discourse as the "historic March 9th speech," Mohammed VI called new elections and promised constitutional reforms that would "deepen democracy" and limit his powers.[53] Over the next weeks and

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[50] *Interview 42*, February 2020.
[51] *Interview 31*, January 2020.
[52] *Interview A,* April 2019. See also Adria Lawrence's contemporaneous analysis of the protest movement and its effects on the monarchy, in which an interlocutor expresses a similar attitude: Lawrence, "Morocco's Resilient Protest Movement," *Foreign Policy*. February 20th, 2012. https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/20/moroccos-resilient-protest-movement/
[53] Mohammed VI Speech, March 9th 2011. https://www.maroc.ma/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9

months, and especially after the king unveiled the constitutional reforms he promised in June, many reform-minded supporters withdrew, satisfied that "at least the head of state worked with the demands and answered them, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt where there was no response."[54] Many of the more experienced activists, however, balked. Though a self-proclaimed leaderless movement, its decisions were driven by general assemblies and coordinating committees (*tansiquiyyat*) whose ranks were largely dominated by AMDH activists and JCA adherents.[55] Through these bodies, the movement officially rejected the constitutional reforms and boycotted the referendum in July and subsequent legislative elections in November.

Some have since regretted these moves, which may have cost the movement sympathy from ordinary Moroccans who viewed their lack of engagement as counterproductive and potentially dangerous (Badran 2019). One activist, for example, wished representatives from the movement would have attempted to influence the drafting of the new constitution, even though the process was controlled by the palace. "The moment when the constitutional committee started, they invited a group of youth [to negotiate]. In my opinion they should have gone and talked….at the very least, for the sake of history, you will have expressed your positions—even if it's from within the regime."[56] Another argued that, as an activist in an authoritarian country, "you use what you get because we don't have a lot of strings to pull."[57] Had activists participated in negotiations and then voted no, instead of boycotting, "we would have had the right to

[54] *Interview 13*, October 2019.
[55] These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, though in practice AMDH members largely hail from the leftist Unified Socialist Party (PSU) and the communist Democratic Path Party (*an-nahj*). While both *an-Nahj* and JCA renounce electoral politics, and some JCA members dialogue with AMDH members, the AMDH remains a largely leftist space.
[56] *Interview 23*, November 2019.
[57] *Interview 34*, January 2020.

complain about the result." By not even voting in the constitutional referendum, activists "gave the green light to the Ministry of Interior" to tamper with results.[58]

The constitutional referendum process was indeed marked by serious irregularities.[59] The king himself used a speech from the throne in June to urge Moroccans to vote yes:

> Your first servant, when he performs his national duty by voting yes for the proposed constitution, which is submitted to a popular referendum, it is because of my firm conviction that this proposed constitution employs all the institutions and principles of development and democracy, the mechanisms of good governance, and because it safeguards the dignity of all Moroccans and their rights, within the framework of equality and the rule of law.[60]

With explicit royal backing like this, it was hard for movement activists to call for a boycott or a "no" vote. For example, when one interlocutor tried to campaign against the referendum with other activists in *Taqadoum*—a poor and sprawling district on the edge of Rabat—they were immediately surrounded by local residents brandishing knives and

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[58] *Interview 30*, January 2020.

[59] Contemporaneous reporting by *NPR* documents some of the concerns expressed by activists and observers regarding the fairness of the referendum: https://www.npr.org/2011/07/01/137565293/morocco-adopt-new-constitution-in-landslide-vote

[60] Mohammed VI Speech, June 17th 2011. https://www.maroc.ma/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9

sticks, clearly in "coordination with the authorities."[61] It ultimately passed in a landslide on July 1st, with more than 98% of voters approving the new constitution—a result the interlocutor likened to "North Korea."

With the new constitution approved and the ranks of protesters thinning, authorities stepped up repression. As they did so, the tenuous discipline in slogans and tactics that characterized the first month of protests began to disintegrate further—and with it, the fragile alliance holding the remaining, ideologically divergent protest groups together. In November, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won legislative elections, bringing the last remaining major opposition party in the kingdom into government. Shortly thereafter, JCA abruptly withdrew from the movement. Collectively, these moves were "the *makhzen*'s last cards to play," as one interlocutor explained.[62] Or, as another put it: "The *makhzen* decided, okay that's it (*safi salina*). This problem has been fixed. You got what you want. Here's your constitution, here's your Islamist government."[63] Overnight, the already dwindling ranks of protesters grew even smaller, and by the movement's one year anniversary, few remained on the streets. The movement that had only a year earlier made the throne shake ended unceremoniously, driven apart by internal divisions and a monarchy seemingly well practiced in the art of managing dissent with intermittent promises of democratic reform.

2. Reading the Messages beyond the Divisions

[61] *Interview 29*, January 2020.
[62] *Ibid*.
[63] *Interview 22*, November 2019.

Given the ideological and tactical divisions that steadily sapped the February 20th Movement's momentum, contemporary analyses have tended to focus on some activists' "self-limiting" nature (Vairel 2014) and the internal disputes that drove the movement into radical and reformist camps (e.g. Badran 2019). These divisions are real and have deep roots in Morocco's long history of political activism and conflict among—and between—the left and the right. But for our purposes, what's more important is how activists managed to overcome divisions and extract concessions from the monarchy—even if the movement was ultimately driven apart. How did a fractious coalition compel the king to renew his promises of democratic reform, promulgate a new constitution, and call new elections? To answer this question, I turn the focus in this section toward what protest participants said publicly through their placards and demands—how they crafted their messages to speak to power and resonate among ordinary people, despite divisions.

Through the placards demonstrators raised and the demands protest leaders negotiated, the February 20th Movement demanded a "democratic constitution" that expressed "popular sovereignty" and curbed the king's expansive powers.[64] Many who demonstrated carried placards calling for a "King who reigns but doesn't rule" while others singled out Article 19 of the constitution, which characterizes the king as sacred and grants him the right to rule on this basis. Royal advisers Mounir Majidi and Fouad Ali el-Himma were also targeted.[65] While such figures might once have remained unknown to ordinary Moroccans, faced with the scrutiny of a burgeoning independent

[64] The movement also advanced several other important demands, including recognition of Tamazight (Berber) as an official language alongside Arabic and an independent judiciary separated from both the elected government and the palace.

[65] For more on the placards carried by protesters, see here: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/12/world/middleeast/12iht-M12-MOROCCO-MOVEMENT.html; and here: https://globalvoices.org/2011/02/21/morocco-explaining-the-protests/; see also Vairel 2014, Chapter 8.

press, they were transformed in the preceding years into symbols of corruption and cronyism.[66] Notably absent, however, were explicit calls for the king's ouster. Instead of calling for the fall of the regime—the watchword of the 2011 MENA uprisings—most protesters called for "the fall of corruption and tyranny." As one interlocutor, a leftist activist, observed, "there was the demand that the government resign and that the king's advisers resign and be held accountable—and with this you get to the monarchy's inner circle."[67] But most protesters stopped there. Based on these outward appearances, some analysts concluded at the time that the king's legitimacy remained intact (Vairel 2014, 311) and that calling for anything beyond a constitutional monarchy remained "unthinkable"[68] for Moroccans.

Internal debates over messaging, however, tell a more nuanced story. "People wanted to say '*isqāṭ al-malakiya'* [fall of the monarchy] but they weren't allowed to," one protest participant insisted to me.[69] "I don't believe in a constitutional monarchy, personally," another confided, while noting he still joined the protests.[70] Another interlocutor, however, indicated that the choice of constitutional monarchy was "very important" because "people won't like the other ideas."[71] He explained that in effectively calling for a system "like in Spain and England," they could "protect the king" by not demanding his ouster, while ensuring their message didn't alienate ordinary Moroccans. Debates like these over the relative virtues of parliamentary monarchy have dogged

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[66] In *darija*, frustration with rampant cronyism is often rendered with the expression *bāk ṣāḥabi* ("your father is my friend"). Majidi and el-Himma came to epitomize *bāk ṣāḥabi* and those who use their privileged access to power for illicit ends.
[67] *Interview 13*, October 2019.
[68] Sater, "Morocco's 'Arab' Spring," *Middle East Institute*. October 1st, 2011. https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-arab-spring
[69] *Interview 36*, February 2020.
[70] *Interview 13*, October 2019.
[71] *Interview 20*, November 2019.

regime opponents for generations in Morocco—and indeed, many of the groups that formed the core of the protest movement have long been distinguished for their opposition to monarchy as a form of rule.[72] The Islamist group JCA, for example, openly rejects the king's legitimacy and envisions a future Moroccan state without the monarchy. Leftist monarchy skeptics from *Nahj*, meanwhile, advocate for a democratic republic. It was to accommodate these divergent long-term visions that more experienced activists insisted on dropping explicit calls for constitutional monarchy early on. Instead, they called for a "democratic constitution" that would reduce the monarchy's powers and bring them in line with the king's previous promises of reform.

These internal debates—and their contrast with the movement's public presentation—offer two important lessons for understanding legitimation and contestation in Morocco and beyond. First, they illustrate the importance of not inferring belief in a ruler's legitimacy from the outward presentation of a protest movement alone. While many of those who participated in the February 20th Movement wanted "the king to stay, but be democratic,"[73] others hoped for more radical change. That Mohammed VI himself was (largely) not targeted by protesters thus reveals more about the perceptions and tactics of movement participants than it does his legitimacy.

Yet more importantly, the contrast between internal debates and external messaging reveals how the monarchy's justification for rule as an apolitical arbiter and democratic reformer structures how critics engage in their public opposition. Indeed, regime opponents deliberately used the language of power to craft their messages to

[72] Debates over protest slogans extended beyond those concerning the monarchy and its political power. There was, for example, significant tension regarding religious slogans raised by JCA supporters.
[73] *Ibid*.

ensure the broadest appeal—even though many harbored more radical demands. In other words, protest leaders converged around a set of public demands that called on the king to give up some powers and hew more closely to his legitimation claim precisely because they understood such demands would be more likely to resonate among ordinary Moroccans—and would be harder for the regime to delegitimize and portray as radical.[74] The king's promises and self-presentation represented, to borrow from Scott, a "kind of symbolic Achilles' heel" (1990, 105). By framing their demands in this way, protesters were "in effect call[ing] upon the [king] to take [his] his own rhetoric seriously" (106).

For some, of course, moderating public demands by asking the king to live up to his word was akin to selling out. Explaining why he didn't join the movement, one Amazigh activist told me that "parliamentary monarchy was the ceiling of the demands" and the movement's "horizon was limited" because of Morocco's political system."[75] Yet, that even those who bristle at the constraints imposed by this limited horizon acknowledge its existence suggests a shared understanding of the vulnerabilities generated by the monarchy's self-presentation—even if some would rather uproot the monarchy altogether than exploit its vulnerabilities to extract concessions. And in recent years, as will become apparent in later chapters, there are indications that the horizon has expanded and that "the ceiling of demands is now much higher."[76]

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[74] Scott makes a similar point when discussing what he calls "critiques within the hegemony" (1990, 106). Such an attack is not only "a legitimate critique by definition, but it always threatens to appeal to the sincere members of the elite in a way that an attack from outside their values could not" (106-107). In Morocco, it might be those most convinced by the monarchy's public justification for rule—those who most fervently believe the king is an apolitical arbiter and support his right to rule on this basis—who are most swayed by demands that call on the king to live up to his promises of democratic reform and political non-interference.

[75] *Interview 38*, February 2020.

[76] *Interview 54*, April 2020.

Finally, it is also worth examining not just those messages crafted and negotiated by experienced activists beforehand, but also the flashes of alternative, more radical ones. After the king's intervention in early March and some protest participants returned home, observers documented a marked decline in discipline and organization. Analyzing the protests in Casablanca, Bennani-Chraïbi and Jeghllaly note that "during this phase, the tone taken vis-a-vis the king became increasingly transgressive" (2012, 126). For example, in one protest in mid-March, some demonstrators changed their slogans from "a king who reigns but doesn't rule" to "a king who neither reigns nor rules" after authorities began using force to disperse them (125). Several interlocutors recalled similar incidents in Rabat, with one lamenting that after some began shouting "*isqaṭ al-niẓam*" [fall of the regime], they were swiftly arrested by authorities and their "lives were ruined."[77] Yet even early on, there were some eager to express more radical sentiments. "I still remember the first day of the February 20th movement, we hadn't been out for more than 4 hours when some people said, 'the people want the fall of the regime,'" recounted one interlocutor, himself no monarchist.[78] "But ousting the regime in 4 hours? No! You just marched for 4 hours, and now you're saying, 'down with the regime?'" Though many retrospectively criticize the naiveté of those who dared to transgress red lines and directly attack the monarchy in 2011, these incidents shed light on the prevalence of norm-defying discourse vis-a-vis the monarchy among ordinary Moroccans even at that time. Indeed, these episodes of spontaneity and transgression demonstrate how quickly the barrier of fear can fall as individuals' perceptions of possibility shift, bringing proscribed speech that had been festering for years to the surface.

[77] *Interview 34*, January 2020.
[78] *Interview 13*, October 2019.

But most February 20th Movement participants—including those with anti-monarchy sentiment—did avoid direct confrontation with the king during the protests. They crafted public demands and negotiated slogans that bridged ideological divides and leveraged the king's promises of reform and self-presentation to extract concessions. Internal divisions did ultimately drive the movement apart—but not before protesters first demonstrated they could put the palace on the defensive.

3. The Monarchy under the Microscope

While protesters forced the palace to introduce concessions, the monarchy emerged from the February 20th Movement with its image largely restored. By responding swiftly to protesters and appearing to meet their demands, the king took the wind out of their sails and partially restored the sense of promise and democratic progress that accompanied his ascension to the throne in 1999. Yet the years following 2011 were different from those at the outset of his reign. On the heels of a once-in-a-generation nationwide mobilization that demonstrated the power of the street to extract concessions, the king was faced with an increasingly engaged, and digitally connected, citizenry. In this environment marked by heightened politicization and lowered thresholds for mobilization, the monarchy thus found itself under the microscope, its justification for rule turned into a topic of debate as ordinary Moroccans picked apart the king's words and evaluated his promises. The king may have defused the protests, but he raised the expectations of millions of Moroccans who were now less reluctant to speak up and assert their rights.

When Mohammed VI addressed his people on March 9th, 2011, he took even some monarchy skeptics by surprise. Sitting in the elaborate hall from which his father had once denounced protesters as "scum" (*'awbash*)[79], Mohammed announced a "comprehensive constitutional review" in a speech that made no explicit mention of the ongoing protests, but which praised "the sincere patriotism shown by my people" and "our ambitious youth."[80] Flanked by his son and younger brother, he pledged the full weight of the monarchy to these "deep reform" efforts, "of which a democratic constitution is both the basis and essence." As he outlined proposed reforms, the king promised that the new constitution would "strengthen the principle of separation of powers," "promote democratization," "provide parliament with new powers," and "consolidate the status of the Prime Minister as the head of an effective executive branch." These concessions, Mohammed declared, would provide the basis for "a new pact between the throne and the people." And while the king did not say so, such reforms, if implemented, would also finally put into practice what the monarchy had long maintained: that it was an apolitical force for good in the country, above petty politics and self-interest.

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[79] Following IMF-mandated structural adjustment programs that dramatically raised the price of staple goods, Morocco was rocked by two major protests in 1981 and 1984. The latter protests, which were largely concentrated in the long-marginalized Rif region in the North, prompted Hassan II to denounce demonstrators as "scum." The former king had an especially strong dislike of Riffians, against whom he had led a military campaign while still crown prince to consolidate monarchical power shortly after independence.

[80] Mohammed VI Speech, March 9th 2011. https://www.maroc.ma/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9

Though the king's speech also made clear that the commission drafting the new constitution would be appointed by him, many were buoyed by the prospect of legitimate democratic reform—especially at a time when other leaders in the region were refusing to engage in substantial dialogue or reform. As one leftist explained, "the reaction of the king [to the protests] was unexpected" and the "style" of his speech left many with the impression that "he was going to answer the majority of our demands."[81] Another interlocutor recalled how in the months following the speech and constitutional referendum, a popular discourse casting Mohammed VI as a "smart, wise visionary" emerged—not dissimilar to how many greeted his ascension to the throne in 1999.[82] The new constitution itself also served as a locus of hope for some Moroccans, as one Amazigh activist described:

> When the constitution was reformed, do you know what a woman told me? "Did they change the constitution?" I told her, "yes," and she said, "it will put our country to work." To her, the constitution was her whole life and would put her kids to work. This is just so you know the size of the hope many had.[83]

A new constitution and a renewed discourse of reform helped restore Mohammed VI's image and bring a glimmer of hope to ordinary Moroccans eager for change. Coupled with the victory of the PJD in elections that November, which brought the last major opposition party into government—along with its outspoken and charismatic

[81] *Interview 30*, January 2020.
[82] *Interview 33*, January 2020.
[83] *Interview 14*, October 2019.

leader, Abdelilah Benkirane—many Moroccans thought the kingdom might finally take the decisive step toward democratization with a "strong prime minister" empowered by a new, purportedly democratic constitution.[84] This perception extended to some of those who boycotted the elections or disliked the PJD's Islamist politics as well. Indeed, as one woman belonging to the Unified Socialist Party's (PSU) youth wing put it, "we thought we had to give them a chance since they had never been in power before."[85]

While the king's speeches and the constitutional referendum and election that followed helped convince many that the monarchy might finally accede to demands for democratic reform, these events also provided the opportunity for ordinary Moroccans to publicly debate the king's proper political role, contemplate his promises, and evaluate his performance—all openly and at the behest of the monarch himself, who encouraged his citizens to "mobilize collectively" and expressed his hope for a "broad national debate" as the constitution was drafted. "Before the February 20th Movement," one long-time activist recounted, conversations about the appropriate role of the king and state institutions "were confined to political activists."[86] The movement helped turn these issues into "a topic of open discussion." Another younger activist argued that "[2011] was when a lot of ordinary Moroccans learned what a constitution really is, and the importance of it. [The movement] created a society-wide discussion about the issues we care about."[87] Given the palace's outsized influence on Moroccan media, of course, this discussion was somewhat curtailed. While the palace evinced a desire for Moroccans to carefully weigh the king's proposed reforms, in practice, officials hoped many would

[84] *Interview 18*, October 2019.
[85] *Interview 10*, October 2019.
[86] *Interview 46*, March 2020.
[87] *Interview 22*, November 2019.

accept the king's promises at face value. Yet digital networking tools like Facebook, along with new citizen-led news platforms, helped create a space for meaningful discussion where the king, his promises, and his proper political role could all be scrutinized—and even rejected.

One such platform, *Mamfakinch*—which means "we will not concede" in Moroccan Arabic—played an especially important role. A citizen journalist hub that live-streamed videos, posted first-hand accounts of demonstrations and police brutality, and offered critical news analyses, the site helped level the playing field between the palace and protesters, especially after the king's March 9th speech when some groups withdrew their participation. For example, after royal speeches in March and June, *Mamfakinch* posted critical analyses that took apart the king's words and encouraged Moroccans to reject his proposed reforms. In doing so, *Mamfakinch*—along with other alternative news sites that emerged during this time, like *Lakome*[88] and *Febrayer*—offered "an alternative political vision" for the kingdom (Errazzouki 2017, 371) at a time when Moroccans were hungry for alternative information sources and "increasingly aware that official media were unreliable."[89] And because *Mamfakinch* also posted information in French and English, it attracted international attention as well, ultimately forcing the state to respond to the February 20th Movement's rejection of the proposed constitutional reforms. Indeed, officials were compelled "to engage in debates with February 20th Movement activists on live television" and defend, for example, the fact that the reforms were drafted by a committee appointed entirely by the king (Errazzouki 2017, 371).

[88] *Lakome* was founded by Ali Anouzla and Aboubakr Jamaï, the path-breaking founder of *Le Journal* and *Assahifa* discussed in Chapter 3.
[89] *Interview 13*, October 2019.

Social media, and Facebook in particular, was also important in providing a platform for Moroccans to contemplate the king's promises and political powers. One younger activist likened digital networking tools to the "Gutenberg Bible," which permitted "ordinary people to be able to read their bible" without an intermediary.[90] And so throughout 2011, he explained, "the king would give his speech, but then we could speak about it, I could speak about it"—a back-and-forth dynamic that would persist even after the movement demobilized. Indeed, while the regime had been losing control over the flow of information for years, the February 20th Movement and the debates it spurred among ordinary Moroccans marked a critical turning point. One older activist who participated in the movement described this turning point:

> [The February 20th Movement] changed popular media in a big way….The way people followed social media, especially Facebook, changed in a big way, whether in terms of the number of people who had accounts, the number of hours people spent on Facebook, the number of people who connected to Facebook from a smartphone, and so on. This developed in a big way, in addition to alternative news websites. People realized that they needed to verify their information because what the state says is fabricated. And the media scene developed in a big way, because before it was controlled….It's true that the official media is still not free, but it [also] has developed in a big way. At least, the delivery of information is greater than it was before. This is something radical in my opinion.[91]

[90] *Interview 22*, November 2019.
[91] *Interview 13*, October 2019.

Empowered by digital networking tools and with greater access to information than before, ordinary Moroccans did not take the king's promises as credible by default in 2011. Instead, royal promises became fodder for genuine debate as Moroccans discussed, both offline and online, what, exactly, they wanted from their king. Thus, while the king's promises demobilized protesters and temporarily restored his image, he was now under the microscope and faced with the heightened expectations of an increasingly digitally connected citizenry.

4. A "New Dynamic" in Political Engagement and Contestation

Throughout 2011, as conversations unfolded across Morocco about the monarchy's proper political role—and against a backdrop of continued protest mobilization—many Moroccans also began to lose their fear of political speech and protest. This major shift in how ordinary people viewed contentious politics has had an enduring impact on the field of protest and popular contention in Morocco in the years since. "People are still against the parties and the system," one activist observed, "but they aren't against politics anymore."[92] In what nearly all my interlocutors considered to be its crowning—and in some cases, only—achievement, the February 20th Movement "returned Moroccans to the street"[93] and "broke the barrier of fear"[94] that had inhibited many from expressing political opinions or participating in direct political action. One

[92] *Interview 25*, November 2019.
[93] *Interview 19*, October 2019.
[94] *Interview 23*, November 2019.

interlocutor, a long-time activist who spent time in jail under former King Hassan II, described this change:

> One positive thing that the February 20th Movement helped create that I consider important is that people are no longer as afraid as they were before. […] Because after [the movement] you find that in a lot of cities, whenever there is a problem, people go out to the streets. In Taza, Sidi Ifni, Zagora, Jerada—people now have the power to say no! This is positive. […] And if you go on social media and you do a comparison between what was written before and what is written now, you see that people are writing in an open way, they aren't afraid anymore. Now people are even criticizing the king [and before] no one would criticize the king! … So this social movement, among what I consider its most important results, is to free people from their fear.[95]

Indeed, though activists today remain divided over the February 20th Movement's trajectory, there remains a broad consensus that it inaugurated a new era of popular contention in Morocco. One interlocutor explained that signs of increased contestation were everywhere, noting that "in all areas and all cities, there are way more protests today than there were before," something which he attributed to the "new dynamic" created by the February 20th Movement, which "broke loose an energy that had been hiding."[96] Another interlocutor who has covered protests across the kingdom since 2011 as an independent journalist explained how this "new dynamic" has unfolded:

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[95] *Interview 7*, September 2019.
[96] *Interview 30*, January 2020.

> Moroccans have reclaimed the street and come to know that if they have a problem, they have to take to the streets….There is no longer fear of protesting because people no longer talk about how, if you're protesting, you're just looking for trouble. So even philosophically, just the idea of 'going out to shout for your rights' [has become normal]....This is among the most important contributions [of the movement]...and it continues today and will continue in the future.[97]

And while official statistics can be unreliable, many interlocutors described in quantitative terms just how dramatically protest action has increased since 2011. According to one:

> Morocco went from 300 protest sit-ins a year in 2006 or 2007, to more than 20,000 or 30,000 a year in the years after [the February 20th Movement]. And so protest action and the occupation of the streets began to appear and are one of the many forms of [claiming] the rights of people, whether about water, about electricity, about infrastructure, about their regional problems, about the problems of their area, about specific groups — teachers, the unemployed, students, professors, doctors, engineers, and so on.[98]

Survey data from the Arab Barometer appears to support activists' observations. Between 2007 and 2018, the number of Moroccans reporting that they have never

[97] *Interview 19*, October 2019.
[98] *Interview 13*, October 2019.

participated in a protest, march, or sit-in declined by over 9% to 71%.[99] When stratified by age, the trend is even more striking. While the age breakdown is not available for the 2007 wave, the percentage of 18–29-year-olds reporting no prior protest participation dropped from 83% in 2013 to 64% in 2018. To be sure, these are only modest changes and the effect appears to be delayed. But this is consistent with interview evidence that suggests the February 20th Movement set in motion long-term changes in ordinary Moroccan's orientation toward political protest and activism—changes that may take some time before registering in self-reported survey data. The trend, moreover, is clear.

Alongside a shared sense that protests have risen markedly in the years following 2011, interlocutors also detailed the emergence of a new, 'rights-based' language, as one civil society actor elucidated:

> Any normal thing, anything about citizens' rights, it is now natural to demonstrate for it…The ordinary Moroccan can go by himself. He doesn't need [political parties or activists]. If he thinks his case is fair, he will take the people with him and go directly to the streets with his phone. People have started to believe this is the solution. This is one of the most important things from [the February 20th Movement]. People started to believe that we won't get anything without protest….people now see that this is how the state responds."[100]

[99] https://www.arabbarometer.org/countries/morocco/
[100] *Interview 22*, November 2019.

Or, as another civil society actor put it: "Moroccans learned to trust in themselves…now people believe that they have the right to denounce, to claim their rights."[101]

In sum, the collective experience of the February 20th Movement, and the royal concessions and public debates it spawned, helped demonstrate for many Moroccans the power of protest and direct political action. This extended even to those who never joined protesters in the streets or even supported all of their demands. As one long-time activist notes: "Not everyone who is now engaged and follows politics participated [in the February 20th Movement], but they are participating in the culture [the movement] helped create."[102]

But the February 20th Movement did more than break the barrier of fear for ordinary Moroccans and contribute to an increase in protest activity. By returning an interest in politics and protest to ordinary Moroccans, the movement also signaled the beginning of a new era of heightened political awareness. The eagerness with which Moroccans followed daily political developments in 2011 thus did not disappear with the passage of constitutional reforms, the election of the PJD, or the demobilization of the protest movement. Instead, it was transformed into a more durable disposition—a disposition that endures today. An interlocutor who was politically active both before and after the February 20th Movement described this change:

> Before 2011, considering the years of repression Morocco had experienced, there was a generation that was afraid—afraid of politics, of political action, of political discussion….The February 20th Movement brought an interest in political action

[101] *Interview 29*, January 2020.
[102] *Interview 34*, January 2020.

> back to the people. People became less afraid of political organizations and there were discussions about political issues. Moroccans learned who the ministers were, who the prime minister was, who the interior minister was, who the other ministers were and what they did. They followed the activities of parliament and began to learn about protests….Moroccans began to form a political consciousness and involve themselves in political action—with a level of political awareness more elevated than before the movement.[103]

The February 20th Movement marked an inflection point even for those veteran activists whose elevated political awareness had long distinguished them from their peers—and for whom the king's promises of reform never resonated. Among this subset of activists, the 2011 protests helped reveal the extent to which Moroccan public opinion might be more receptive to political change involving the monarchy than they had thought. "We realized we had a lot of people on our side in 2011," confided one long-time leftist who had resigned himself to political isolation prior to the protests.[104] Another put it more artfully: "before the February 20th Movement, a lot of us felt like we were orphans of thought."[105] The experience of the protest movement, however, "showed a lot of us that we were not alone, that we were not the only ones who thought about freedom and justice and dignity." In some ways, then, the protests helped demonstrate for long-time activists the extent of preference falsification among ordinary Moroccans. There was little indication, of course, that many Moroccans were ready to join the country's more

[103] *Interview 13*, October 2019.
[104] *Interview 34*, January 2020.
[105] *Interview 41*, February 2020.

radical political currents that reject the monarchy wholesale. But the February 20th Movement nonetheless revealed that the monarchy's popular support was neither absolute nor unconditional—and that even those who believed in its legitimacy still expected their king to abide by his promises.

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Faced with regional upheaval and a growing protest movement at home, King Mohammed VI moved quickly to reassert control over his kingdom. He unveiled constitutional reforms designed to respond to protesters' demands and curb his own power, and he invited the kingdom's last major opposition party to form a government. As protests descended into violence elsewhere in the region in the months and years that followed, these moves helped Mohammed stand out from his counterparts elsewhere in the region. Yet to think of the swift concessions offered by the king in response to the protests as a sign of his complete mastery over his country's politics would be a mistake. In retrospect, it is easy to think it was inevitable that protesters would be defeated and driven apart by division, or that the Moroccan regime's successful navigation of a tumultuous period in regional politics is a sign of its exceptionalism or the king's unique legitimacy. Such perspectives ignore the magnitude of what protesters accomplished and erase the dynamism and contingency inherent in how authoritarian elites manage opposition and dissent. Interrupting a yearslong slide that saw a return to repression and declining tolerance for dissent, the February 20th Movement put the palace back on the defensive. As one interlocutor explained, "there wasn't any other solution for the regime

other than to give a political response. Of course the response wasn't enough, but it was still a political response—and it was the movement that pushed the regime to offer these concessions."[106]

Morocco was no stranger to large protests prior to 2011, and many had been simply "waiting for a reason" to mobilize.[107] But combined with a uniquely permissive regional environment and a rapidly changing communications landscape that endowed ordinary people with powerful tools for challenging and subverting authoritarianism, the February 20th Movement managed to do what no other movement had done in recent memory: it forced the regime to abruptly change its plans, to return to the more accommodating posture that it had been slowly abandoning in the years before. "The *makhzen* doesn't give anything for free," explained one interlocutor.[108] The protests therefore succeeded in compelling regime elites to readjust their survival strategies—to pivot back toward incorporation of opposition and signal tolerance of dissenting voices. As a result, the king himself was compelled to renew publicly and repeatedly his commitment to democratic reforms and political non-interference—that is, to his own justification for rule and the image he had cultivated since taking the throne. While these changes in regime strategy would prove to be temporary, by effectively getting the king on the record, the movement raised the stakes for the monarchy—all the more so given rising political engagement and declining fear among an increasingly digitally connected citizenry.

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[106] *Interview 19*, October 2019.
[107] *Interview 13*, October 2019
[108] *Interview 23*, November 2019.

In the next chapter, I turn to the years immediately following the February 20th Movement when the regime once again sought to signal openness to reform while simultaneously sidelining oppositional actors via co-optation. While in 2011 the king managed to defuse protests and restore his image through promises of reform, these reforms failed to materialize and the regime soon returned to its old ways. But after years of relying on co-optation and empty promises to reinforce the monarchy's legitimation claim, the king would have a harder time escaping popular scrutiny or political blame.

CHAPTER FIVE

Great Expectations: Co-optation and Reform in the Shadow of 2011

For Moroccans who remembered the brief political opening and sense of promise that accompanied the *alternance* government and Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne, the years following the February 20th Movement proved all too familiar. A long-time opposition party with a popular base of support and credible reputation was given the reins of government. Outspoken activists were appointed to prominent positions in state-run bodies. Other activists received funding and legal recognition for new civil society organizations. And the king promised a new era of democratic progress and economic development. Following the February 20th Movement, however, it was the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) that took over government, not the leftists of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) or the secular conservatives of the Independence Party (PI). And instead of former political prisoners and exiled activists from the Years of Lead, it was a new generation of activists and political elite who joined official human rights bodies and founded new civil society organizations. The king's promises of democratic reform and economic development were, however, similar. And so too, it would turn out, was his lack of sincerity.

Put on the defensive by the protests and hoping to maintain his image as an apolitical arbiter committed to democratic reform, the king pivoted back toward incorporation. But presented with the opportunity to make meaningful political changes that would align political practice with regime rhetoric, Mohammed VI instead attempted

to do what he had done before at the outset of his reign: use promises of reform as vehicles for sidelining oppositional voices through co-optation—and then attempt to let blame fall on co-opted actors when reforms inevitably failed to meet expectations. Yet by doubling down on co-optation as a strategy for deflecting popular blame and burnishing his image as an apolitical arbiter, the king further hollowed out the ranks of oppositional actors in the kingdom and put his own justification for rule in jeopardy.

This chapter argues that in the years following the February 20th Movement, years of increasingly comprehensive co-optation began to catch up with the palace's legitimation strategy, eroding any meaningful distinction between the palace and the kingdom's other political forces. Two successive phases of co-optation had left the king vulnerable to public scrutiny—and, ultimately, unprecedented criticism. The political environment had also changed significantly between Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne in 1999 and his superficial overtures following the 2011 protests. Moroccans were more politically engaged, had access to powerful new digital tools for sharing information, and had already lived through one round of royal promises followed by underwhelming results. While many Moroccans gave the king the benefit of the doubt the first time, blaming USFP, PI, and other political elite for failed reforms in the late 90s and early 2000s, I argue that this time they expected real results. So when the PJD, like the USFP and PI, proved unable to implement its agenda and promised reforms faltered, the king would not find it so easy to escape popular blame. The years that followed 2011 thus would put tremendous strain on the notion that the king was somehow uninvolved in politics and not responsible for persistent governance failures.

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Thematically, this chapter chronicles the regime's efforts to double down on co-optation in the wake of the February 20th Movement and reprise the strategy it first deployed beginning in the 1990s under Hassan II. Along with Chapter 3, it describes the second of two major periods of co-optation and promises of liberalization in contemporary Morocco. Theoretically, this chapter demonstrates how comprehensive co-optation can harm legitimation strategies premised on claims of apoliticism. Combined with the co-optation associated with the *alternance* period, the phase of co-optation that followed the 2011 protests dramatically reduced the ranks of the kingdom's independent political actors, leaving the king without the traditional mediators who had once stood between him and his people, absorbing popular anger over governance failures. Thus when faced with yet another wave of protests and dissent, as we will see in Chapter 6, the regime was compelled to sharply increase repression.

I divide the chapter into four parts. In the first, I analyze the PJD's record after entering government as the kingdom's last remaining major opposition party. Despite a new constitution that ostensibly granted the elected government greater power, the party ultimately proved unable or unwilling to confront the palace over its political prerogatives and saw its programmatic agenda stymied. In the second section I turn to the party's unusually charismatic leader, Abdelilah Benkirane. As prime minister, Benkirane helped keep the public engaged and the king in the spotlight, even without ever blaming him for failed reforms—forcing the palace to orchestrate his ouster after his first term in

office. The third section examines co-optation beyond the PJD, detailing the regime's efforts to sideline voices of the February 20th Movement. While some actors associated with the protest movement found homes in palace-friendly political parties and state institutions, others joined apolitical associations that benefited from regime recognition and funding. These moves helped fuel the perception that there was little space for political action independent of palace influence. In the final section, I examine in greater detail the net effect of years of increasingly comprehensive co-optation: the "collapse of traditional mediators."[1] Sapped of their credibility and independent identity—and thus their ability to absorb popular blame—I argue that the kingdom's major organized political interests grew increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of ordinary Moroccans in the years following the February 20th Movement. The king's image as an apolitical arbiter committed to his kingdom's economic and political development began to break down as a result—and with it, the palace's broader legitimation strategy. This set the king on a collision course with an increasingly frustrated and outspoken citizenry.

1. Co-opting the PJD

Though the PJD never endorsed the February 20th Movement, "its heart was there."[2] Along with members of the party's youth wing, some prominent party figures who would go on to hold important positions in future governments also participated in the protests, including future Justice Minister Mustafa Ramid.[3] Riffing on the slogans

[1] *Interview 37*, February 2020.
[2] *Interview 18*, October 2019.
[3] Ramid, along with two other members of the party's leadership, Lahbib Choubani and Abdelali Hamieddine, resigned their positions in order to join the protests. Officially, the party did not support the

shouted by February 20th Movement activists, the party promised to end corruption and fight for "dignity and social justice" through new social programs for the poor in its electoral campaign. And during the 2011 parliamentary elections—the first ones held under the new constitution—the party emerged victorious. After years of working to allay concerns from authorities about its Islamist identity—sometimes even limiting the number of seats it contested in previous elections[4]—the PJD more than doubled its seats in parliament and captured the premiership.

The party's success surprised even some of its members. As one young PJD member who participated in the 2011 protests put it: "the PJD was ultimately the biggest winner of [the February 20th Movement]. Before the protests, the party was weak and no one ever thought it would be in the government, much less that it would win [a plurality] of seats in Parliament."[5] Casting itself as an anti-system party that could effect meaningful change from within, the PJD stood out from Morocco's other major parties—all of which, by 2011, had either long since lost their credibility after co-optation, or which had never been seen as anything other than extensions of the palace.[6] Rewarded after years of effort, the PJD finally had their chance to govern.

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protests. According to one interlocutor close with the former prime minister, Benkirane remained "angry" that members had participated in the movement, considering it a "mistake" (Interview 18). The same interlocutor, however, stressed that "his [Benkirane's] heart was with the movement." Perhaps party leadership only changed their tune after the PJD emerged victorious from the elections that the protest movement precipitated. Had they not, figures like Ramid might not have returned to the party's good graces so quickly.

[4] For more on the party's long-term evolution, embrace of parliamentary politics, and authorities' concerns with its rise, see Spigel, "Morocco's Islamist Prime Minister," *Foreign Policy*. December 5th, 2011. https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/05/moroccos-islamist-prime-minister/

[5] *Interview 18*, October 2019.

[6] As discussed in Chapter 3, in Morocco all political parties that compete in elections must first accept the political primacy of the monarchy. Thus all legally-recognized parties publicly accept the legitimacy of the king and the country's monarchical structure—including "opposition" parties like the PJD. Yet there remains an important distinction between political parties created by allies of the palace—known as "administrative parties" in Morocco—and those parties with an independent reputation and mass base of support. It is to this latter set of parties that the PJD belongs and in this sense that it is an "opposition"

In office, however, delivering on campaign promises while defending the parliament's new, constitutionally-granted prerogatives proved exceptionally difficult. In instance after instance, the PJD opted for collaboration over confrontation with the palace and its proxies in parliament, and it failed to make maximum use of the powers granted to it by the new constitution. For example, in 2012 the party turned down an opportunity to press the issue of the king's powers to appoint the heads of major state-run enterprises. While the palace's appointment power was curbed by the new constitution, the PJD did not take full advantage of this, opting instead for gradualism and hailing the modest increase in appointments made by the government as a success, despite broad criticism.[7] In what would become a pattern, the PJD-led government failed to ensure the new "democratic constitution" was respected in other areas as well. Indeed, by 2013—two full years after it was approved by voters—only 2 of the 20 implementing laws required by the new constitution had been approved by parliament.[8] That same year, the PJD allowed the general secretariat of parliament—a position that reports to the palace, not the government—to introduce its own bill regulating parliamentary investigative committees, blocking a stronger bill being drafted by legislative committees.[9] The investigative

party. And like the two other major independent "opposition" parties were co-opted beforehand—the Independence Party and the USFP—the PJD has at times been more confrontational vis-a-vis the regime.

[7] Even some parliamentarians in the governing majority dissented, including those from the PJD who accused leadership of becoming too cozy with the palace. For more, see here: https://www.dw.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83/a-15958925; See also: https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/10275/maroc-nomination-chefs-d-entreprises-publiques.html

[8] See Monjib, "Constitutionally Unbalanced," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. August 8th, 2013. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/52626

[9] *Ibid.*

committees, mandated by the new constitution, were intended to give parliament the ability to monitor and investigate the government and state institutions. Yet by deferring to a figure responsible to the palace, not the voters, the PJD-led government significantly weakened what might have otherwise been a powerful new tool for leveling the playing field between the parliament, the government, and the king. The episode, like others that occurred under the PJD's watch, revealed "the palace's efforts to minimize the impact of constitutional reforms and safeguard its monopoly over power."[10] It also signaled that, despite royal promises and rhetoric about democratic progress, little had changed in the operation of power in the kingdom.

The PJD underwhelmed in its pledge to fight corruption as well. Despite promising the "fall of corruption" in line with what protesters in 2011 demanded, the PJD largely avoided making any moves that might anger the palace and its allies—including the royal advisers singled out by the February 20th Movement as symbols of corruption and self-dealing. Any anti-corruption campaign worth its salt would need to confront these figures, and, perhaps, the king himself, whose vast business interests touch nearly all facets of the Moroccan economy. This, of course, the PJD was not willing to do. The new anti-corruption body they unveiled in 2014, for example, had even fewer powers than the one that preceded it. Not only did it not grant whistleblowers anonymity, but the new body also had no ability to independently pursue investigations or open branches throughout the kingdom. What's more, its members were all to be appointed by the government or the palace—excluding both parties in the opposition and civil society

[10] Fakir, "Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. December 28th, 2017. https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/12/28/morocco-s-islamist-party-redefining-politics-under-pressure-pub-75121

actors.[11] While the party had some success with other initiatives related to financial disclosures and access to information, they remained largely superficial.[12] It is no surprise, then, that perceptions of corruption in Morocco remained largely unchanged in the years following the PJD's entry into government.[13]

The PJD's reluctance to confront the palace over its constitutional prerogatives or the rampant corruption among royal advisers—along with the unpopular structural adjustment reforms it passed[14]—left many Moroccans disenchanted. "It's as if the constitution provided for a 1000 square meter space," a PJD activist lamented, "but we've only built 50 square meters."[15] Another activist on the left noted that, following the 2011 protests, "they [the regime] started to reverse themselves with the new constitution and even violate it….What the constitution of 2011 gave the government—what they gave with their right hand, they've taken away with their left."[16] One interlocutor who boycotted the 2011 elections, meanwhile, decried how easily the PJD was manipulated by the palace: "Benkirane's government was just a means of passing policies that were against the demands of the February 20th Movement, because the *makhzen* couldn't do it themselves."[17] She argued that "it felt like all the different parties were just puppets and we were all forced to watch the play."

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[11] *Ibid;* see also: https://telquel.ma/2015/02/11/lutte-corruption-nouvelle-instance-sans-super-pouvoirs_1434013
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] Per Transparency International's corruption perception index. For more, see here: https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/morocco
[14] The PJD-led government ended subsidies for commercial and residential fuels, as well as raised the retirement age from 60 to 63 for public employees, in a bid to curb public debt and meet the demands of IMF creditors. For more, see Fakir, "Morocco's Islamist Party."
[15] *Interview 18*, October 2019.
[16] *Interview 19*, October 2019.
[17] *Interview 10*, October 2019.

Like the former opposition parties that preceded it, the PJD thus proved to be a largely compliant and conciliatory force vis-a-vis the king and his advisers. This further reinforced the perception that the political parties, and parliament itself, were powerless before the palace—a perception that had been growing ever since the failure of the *alternance* government in 2002, and especially after the emergence and overnight success of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) in 2007, headed by royal confidant Fouad Ali el-Himma. An Amazigh activist captured this growing sentiment well: "What's the use of voting for some party which ultimately won't be able to implement its political program, even if they have a majority in parliament?"[18] Far from ending corruption or defending newfound constitutional prerogatives, then, the PJD largely followed in the footsteps of Morocco's other co-opted parties after its incorporation into government.

2. Keeping Eyes on the Palace[19]

If in 2011 the palace convinced many Moroccans that it would finally accede to democratic reforms and respect the principle of political non-interference, the following years quickly proved otherwise. Based on its performance in government, the PJD likewise dispelled any notion that it might meaningfully resist the palace's political machinations. Yet unlike at the outset of Mohammed VI's reign, when the longtime opposition parties of the "democratic bloc" joined government and saw their credibility

[18] *Interview 23*, November 2019.
[19] This section draws partially on a separate article co-authored with Sofia Fenner entitled "Power without Power: Performative Opposition in Authoritarian Legislatures" (2021).

plummet after being blamed for stalled democratic reforms, this time the palace would find it harder to escape blame—in part because of who now occupied the prime minister's seat.

Though his party dutifully passed the regime's preferred policies and ensured the king's powers were not significantly weakened by the new constitution, Abdelilah Benkirane nonetheless created significant headaches for the palace as prime minister. Brash, informal, and charismatic, Benkirane captured public attention, generating headlines for his dramatic interventions in parliament, his frequent offhand comments about the king, and his blunt descriptions of his limited powers as prime minister. To be sure, Benkirane never once directly criticized the king or crossed any red lines. An avowed monarchist who rejects even the notion of a constitutional monarchy, his loyalty to the monarchy was never in doubt. Yet his relatable self-presentation and charisma, combined with his willingness to speak openly about the king and his powers, made him unlike any prime minister before him, and helped keep ordinary Moroccans tuned in to politics well beyond the excitement of 2011. But most importantly, Benkirane helped make it clear to supporters and detractors alike that ultimate responsibility for stymied reforms and unpopular policies lay with the palace—and in doing so, he significantly weakened the king's image as an apolitical arbiter committed to democratic reform at a crucial time for the monarchy.[20]

Like most political elites in the kingdom, Moroccan prime ministers typically speak in formal Arabic or even French, and prior to Benkirane, there would have been

[20] As a strong supporter of the monarchy, Benkirane likely never intended to weaken the king's image—perhaps wanting only to protect his party's reputation and avoid blame for unpopular policies. But regardless of his intentions, I suggest his rhetoric and charisma nonetheless taxed the king's image.

little incentive for ordinary Moroccans to watch parliamentary debates. The arrival of the PJD in power, however, changed that. Speaking in an informal register and eschewing formal Arabic for Moroccan *darija*, Benkirane told jokes, hurled insults, constructed elaborate metaphors, and was often moved to tears—all qualities that made him relatable to ordinary Moroccans, even if some thought them unbecoming for a man of power. In parliament he was no different, turning the normally staid chamber into a site for dramatic, if rarely substantive, debates. "People would watch his speeches like they were Barça matches," one interlocutor recalled.[21] Another noted how he drew the formerly disengaged in: "Benkirane got people in the countryside, living on the tops of mountains, to watch parliament for the first time….Even I had never really watched before he came."[22]

Benkirane gave people a reason to tune in, too. Videos of his interventions in parliament have garnered millions of views on YouTube, and they follow a similar format: he begins by thanking the chamber and making a joke, before defending his government's record, criticizing his opponents, or lecturing on Moroccan history. Often, someone interrupts him and the chamber descends into shouting as parliamentarians berate the prime minister from their benches, while the latter thunders back with insults and admonishments: "you're just a councilor, [know] your place! I'm president of the government and I'm entitled to talk"[23]; or, "You have no right to cut off the prime minister!"[24] Other times, filled with self-righteous anger, Benkirane accuses those who interrupt him of involvement in corruption or other improprieties. As the top commenter

[21] *Interview 18*, October 2019.
[22] *Interview 53*, April 2020.
[23]See here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mb6nXXc4w9s&ab_channel=art19videos
[24] See here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40PwxGRB8rE&ab_channel=PjdCommunication

on the second video mentioned above puts it: “They used to come to parliament and sleep until Benkirane came and woke them up.”[25] But more than waking parliamentarians up, Benkirane’s dramatic appearances helped reveal for the Moroccans watching at home the profound dysfunction, and irrelevance, of the body he chaired—while also helping convey to them that he was on their side in the fight against entrenched political interests.

In interviews and press conferences, Benkirane was equally animated, and his penchant for offhand, sometimes salacious remarks about the king helped turn the monarch into a topic of everyday conversation. Though Mohammed VI had sought to cultivate a more relatable image upon taking the throne in 1999, the regime’s legitimation strategy nonetheless remained dependent on maintaining a certain ritualized separation between the king and ordinary Moroccans. Benkirane's brashness and familiarity disrupted this strategy. Take one, highly publicized interview with Al-Jazeera early in his tenure as an example. In a broader conversation about the changing relationship between the palace and parliament under the new constitution, Benkirane was asked why he avoided kneeling before the king as other politicians do. Growing predictably testy at the interviewer’s line of questioning, Benkirane offered a head-turning defense:

> Moroccans greet the king with respect….Some of them express this respect by kissing his shoulder, which is what I do. But I do not have the desire to greet the king by [kneeling and kissing] his hand. I'm sorry Hamid [the interviewer], the

[25] Original text: “كانو شحال هادي كيجيو ينعسوا في البرلمان حتى جا ابن كيران فيقهم”

> king isn't my friend! The king is our king and we hold him in high regard....But Moroccans kneel for no one but God![26]

In another interview from 2016 that also generated headlines, Benkirane was asked about his relationship with the king and his advisers, given the long history of tension between Islamists and the palace. After first denying any lingering animosity and praising the king for "getting to know me directly" after he was appointed, he clarified that he wasn't praising the king just to "please" (*ar-riḍā)* him. Then, as an afterthought, he added: "I am not required to please the king, only God who created me and my mother. As for the king, the relationship I have with him is one of loyalty and compliance with legal norms."[27] This second comment was especially "desacralizing," one interlocutor explained, because it implied that, while God and his mother were deserving of *ar-riḍā*, the king wasn't "because *ar-riḍā* is a religious term and it is too important for the king."[28] In dozens of similar incidents throughout his tenure in office, Benkirane continued to speak about the king "like he was an ordinary person."[29] In doing so, he dispensed with much of the perfunctory adulation and circumspection that typically accompanies politicians' speech regarding the monarchy. In the process, he generated headlines, captured public attention, and modeled a way to talk casually about a figure typically portrayed as above, and apart from, ordinary people.

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[26] Interview with *al-Jazeera*, July 2012. "Benkirane talks about the relationship between the government and the palace under the new constitution." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SquiwXQQS2M&ab_channel=AlJazeeraChannel%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9

[27] Interview with *al-Aoual Press*, July 2016. "Two hours with Benkirane: facts uncovered for the first time about his relationship with the king and those around him." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN1bquwV2zA&ab_channel=alaoualpresse

[28] *Interview 44*, February 2020.

[29] *Interview 21*, July 2019.

Perhaps the aspect of Benkirane's rhetoric that threatened the palace the most, however, was his frankness. Benkirane never shied away from the opportunity to remind Moroccans of his limited powers as prime minister—despite constitutional reforms intended to empower the executive branch. Indeed, in the same interview mentioned above where Benkirane defends his preferred method of greeting the king, he also insisted that he remained "merely" the prime minister. "The one who bears the real responsibility for the country, its leadership and continuity, before God and the people," he explained, "is His Majesty the King"[30] In an interview from 2016, Benkirane was even more direct. Responding to the question, "who governs Morocco?" Benkirane began by describing the extensive powers reserved for the monarchy in the new constitution before offering a succinct, and entirely accurate, conclusion:

> So, who governs Morocco? His Majesty the King. The prime minister simply assists the king. We Moroccans vote, but we do not vote so you can govern by yourself, or according to your own opinion. We vote for you so you can govern within the framework of the king's leadership of the state….But I don't have anything! I have some powers, but these are within the framework of the general powers of His Majesty—just to be honest and frank![31]

Incidents such as these were not outliers. Time and time again, when confronted with questions about his powers, his government's agenda, or proposed laws, Benkirane

[30] Interview with *al-Jazeera*, July 2012.
[31] Interview with *al-Hurra*, October 2016. "An exclusive interview with Abdelilah Benkirane." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnrU3V7iS4U&ab_channel=FreeHourShow%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A9

reminded those listening that he was "just an employee of the king."[32] In doing so, he put significant stress on a claim at the heart of the monarchy's justification for rule: that it is above the political fray. While the regime had come to rely on selective co-optation to insulate the king from politics and blame, not only was this strategy beginning to yield decreasing returns after the failure of the *alternance* government, Benkirane behaved differently than the co-opted prime ministers who preceded him. As one interlocutor succinctly put it: "Benkirane was good for the regime [because he passed their policies], but he was bad for the monarchy."[33] Dragging the king into the tumult of parliamentary politics with his words and informality, Benkirane implicated the monarchy in unpopular policies and stymied democratic reforms. He never blamed the king directly, of course. But his words invited Moroccans to do so—and indeed, many did—even if Benkirane did not intend so. Thus, at a time when the monarchy needed political cover—needed the PJD to dutifully pass laws and quietly accept popular blame—Benkirane instead kept the palace in the spotlight.

Perhaps for this reason, then, after the PJD unexpectedly won reelection in 2016, the palace went to unusual lengths to ensure Benkirane would not serve another term as prime minister. Deploying his proxies in palace-friendly parties, the king set up roadblocks for Benkirane as he negotiated with other parties to form a coalition.[34] One figure in particular, Aziz Akhannouch, proved instrumental in tanking Benkirane's efforts. A billionaire and close friend of the king, Akhannouch used his position as leader

[32] *Interview 35*, January 2020.
[33] *Interview 51*, April 2020.
[34] The sheer number of political parties in Morocco makes it virtually impossible for any one party to win a majority of seats in parliament and govern on its own. This means that even when "opposition" parties like the PJD win a plurality of seats, they often must negotiate with palace parties to form a government, giving the king significant sway over the process, if indirectly.

of the National Rally of Independents (RNI) to demand major concessions from Benkirane in exchange for his party's support, including a reduction in the PJD's portfolio of ministries—despite the party winning even more seats in 2016 than in 2011. When Benkirane refused, a months-long stalemate—dubbed the "*blocage*" by local press—ensued as rumors about palace interference ran rampant. Ultimately, the king intervened publicly and dismissed Benkirane. In his place, he appointed Benkirane's deputy, Saadeddine Othamni, a quiet and unassuming figure who promptly agreed to what Benkirane wouldn't. The king ultimately got what he wanted, but at a price: for five months, the kingdom was without a government as the machinations of the palace and its allies spilled into plain view. Indeed, if Benkirane's charisma and unusual candidness regarding the king helped draw popular attention to the monarchy's role in politics, the circumstances under which he was dismissed as prime minister only served to further highlight palace interference.

3. Sidelining the Voices of February 20th

While Benkirane's charisma and relatability helped temporarily blunt the impact of co-optation on his and his party's reputation, little Benkirane said or the PJD did materially improved the lives of many Moroccans. Incorporating the opposition into government did not catalyze democratization and appointing an outspoken prime minister did not produce an assertive executive branch independent of the palace and able to implement its agenda. And when Benkirane's charisma and frankness proved to be too much, the palace ensured he was silenced. Yet the regime's shift toward greater

incorporation in response to the February 20th Movement did not stop with the PJD. In the years following 2011, the palace and its proxies also sought to incorporate and sideline other oppositional actors, including many activists. Some joined palace-friendly parties and state institutions, encouraged by the prospect of effecting meaningful change from within the system—or otherwise enticed by the prospect of financial stability and safety from repression. Many more founded or joined civil society organizations focusing on culture and education that largely eschewed confrontation with the authorities while benefiting from regime recognition and funding. Like with the PJD, the incorporation of activists had little effect on democratic reforms. It did not, for example, lead to the creation of the kind of strong coalition spanning state institutions, political parties, and civil society that could continue to press the demands of the February 20th Movement and militate for democratization. Instead, the regime's increasingly comprehensive post-2011 co-optation efforts only served to further the impression that the space for political action independent of the state was rapidly closing. In this section, I detail these co-optation efforts and how they generated cynicism toward the discourse of democratic renewal that accompanied the February 20th Movement and the king's public promises to further democratization.

Perhaps the most prominent[35] February 20th Movement activist to later be co-opted by palace proxies was Oussama el-Khlifi, a then-unemployed computer science graduate from Salé whose YouTube video from early 2011 is credited with bringing attention to the nascent efforts to organize protests in Morocco. El-Khlifi would later appear alongside other, more seasoned activists at the AMDH headquarters in Rabat on

[35] As I will discuss below, I do not equate prominence with substantive importance to the operation of the movement itself. Instead, by "prominent" I mean highly visible and publicly associated with the movement.

the eve of the February 20th Movement's launch. In the months that followed, he became a fixture in the foreign and domestic press, always eager to speak about the movement—even if not in its name, at least not officially.[36] Indeed, he came under fire from fellow activists when he told *Akhbar al-Yaoum* in July 2011 that he would consider participating in parliamentary elections to prevent the PJD from winning—despite the movement's official boycott of the elections.[37] He drew criticism yet again when he took to the media to accuse JCA and *Nahj* supporters of "trying to control the movement and change its goals," a move which further amplified internal tensions between reformists like el-Khlifi and the more radical supporters of JCA and *Nahj*.[38] The move that sealed his fate, however, was his decision in early 2012 to join the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). The same party whose founder, royal adviser Fouad Ali el-Himma, had been targeted by demonstrators like el-Khlifi for corruption, managed to convince the prominent activist that its "party program" was sound.[39]

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[36] For representative profiles by foreign media outlets see here: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/26/le-messager-de-la-revolte_1485443_3212.html; and also: https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/04/25/oussama-el-khlifi-detonateur-de-la-contestation-au-maroc_731285/

[37] https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/6281/legislatives-oussama-khlifi-entre-l-usfp.html; see also: https://www.bladi.net/oussama-el-khlifi-usfp.html

[38] https://www.hespress.com/%d8%a3%d8%b3%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a9-%d9%84%d8%ae%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b8%d8%a7%d9%87%d8%b1-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%b9%d9%8a%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%b1%d8%b4-%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%ad-56654.html?__cf_chl_captcha_tk__=pmd_cndm9dekh5qPDvckzOsBdZfrpU6I6jzmmrMu9TYzUlE-1632236559-0-gqNtZGzNA7ujcnBszQr9

[39] https://www.hespress.com/%d8%a3%d8%b3%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ae%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%81%d9%8a-%d9%8a%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%ad%d9%82-%d8%a8%d8%ad%d8%b2%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b5%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a9-%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85-80926.html

El-Khlifi[40] was not alone, however. Other, less media-savvy activists also found homes in palace-friendly parties like PAM in the months and years following the movement's launch. Indeed, since nearly the first demonstrations, rumors about activists being co-opted—or offered "opportunities" by regime officials—circulated widely, both online and offline.[41] One interlocutor lamented that "there were a lot of people coming and going throughout the time of movement," including "self-proclaimed leaders" who would "speak in the name of the movement" without permission to do so.[42] Of course, not all those "coming and going" entered political parties after withdrawing from the protest movement. Some turned to state institutions, like Mounir Bensalah, a popular blogger[43] and early supporter of the movement who published a book on digital activism in 2012. Bensalah joined the Casablanca-Settat branch of Morocco's national human rights council, the National Council of Human Rights or CNDH, in late 2011.[44] By 2019, he had been promoted by the king to serve as Secretary General, the body's second-in-command.[45] Some have defended Bensalah, arguing his voice is needed inside the CNDH, though one supporter conceded "he has had to make some compromises" as a result.[46] Other activists, however, have interpreted Bensalah's professional trajectory as

[40] El-Khlifi was later convicted of serious crimes, including raping a minor, for which he served only a few years in prison. By 2020, he had returned to politics, announcing his intention to compete in upcoming elections on PAM's list. See here: https://al3omk.com/487987.html.
[41] *Interview 41*, February 2020.
[42] *Interview 29*, January 2020.
[43] Bensalah's blog, titled "Des maux à dire," is still accessible, though it has not been updated since 2014. https://bensalahmounir.wordpress.com/
[44] For profiles of Bensalah, see here: https://fr.hespress.com/85181-qui-est-mounir-bensalah-le-nouveau-secretaire-general-du-cndh.html; see also: https://lobservateur.info/article/23415/culture/mounir-bensalah-lingenieur-aux-20000-tweets
[45] In this regard, Bensalah's trajectory mirrors that of those leftists from an earlier generation described in the previous chapter—figures who, after years of confrontational activism against the regime, accepted offers to join the CNDH's predecessor under Hassan II, the CCDH, or the truth commission launched by Mohammed VI in 2004, the IER.
[46] *Interview 29*, January 2020.

further evidence of personal opportunism overriding activist commitments in the wake of the February 20th Movement—especially since the CNDH remained largely silent as restrictions on freedom of speech returned following the protests.[47]

As many activists who remain militant today are eager to point out, figures like el-Khlifi and Bensalah do not speak for or represent the movement, and their post-protest trajectories remain the exception, not the rule, among protest participants. One interlocutor still active in AMDH took pains to distance himself from Khlifi and others like him: "He was just one person, and he wasn't someone big [in the movement], some big activist—just one out of the tens of thousands who protested."[48] Other activists have noted with exasperation how "the press has 'chosen' from the first days of the movement" certain figures to portray as leaders.[49] Indeed, over tea one evening a group of three activists who participated in protests in Casablanca, Rabat, and Marrakech complained about the excessive attention paid to people like Khlifi and Bensalah. Those portrayed as leaders, they argued, simply spoke the words the press wanted to hear, or otherwise lived in places frequented by researchers and journalists—wealthier neighborhoods and major cities not representative of the movement as a whole.[50] This is, of course, indisputable—and the palpable irritation of many of my interlocutors when asked about the co-optation of certain activists suggests this is a recurring topic of conversation.

Yet the high-profile co-optation of self-styled leaders like el-Khlifi and Bensalah was not significant so much because of their actual contributions to a movement defined

[47] Field Notes, July 2019.
[48] *Interview 4*, September 2019.
[49] Field Notes, September 2019.
[50] *Interview 1*, April 2019.

by its ideological heterogeneity and horizontal structure; their co-optation was significant because of their visibility and public association with the protest movement.[51] This visibility was indeed produced by media exposure more than earned through substantive contributions to the protests, but it nonetheless profoundly shaped public perceptions. As one activist disenchanted with the trajectory of many of his fellow activists related, there was a widespread perception that those who participated in the movement were attractive targets for co-optation: "Okay, I was in the movement! What can you give me?….I was in February 20th, so give me something! Give me a little money."[52] Another interlocutor, a well-connected journalist and keen observer of Moroccan politics, explained that many activists were eager to "cash in" on their protest experience after 2011. Thus, whether fair or not, the perception that activists close to the February 20th Movement were more interested in tending to their "political career" than the movement's goals was widespread in the years following the protests.[53]

More numerous than those former activists who entered co-opted political parties or state institutions, however, were those who founded or joined civil society organizations (CSOs). From organizations that use theater, art, and cinema to explore cultural taboos and promote individual liberties to those focused on strengthening citizenship, electoral participation, and human rights awareness, the February 20th Movement spurred a marked increase in CSOs.[54] What these new organizations have in

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[51] As Fenner (2016) demonstrates persuasively elsewhere, the fact of co-optation matters much less than the perceptions it generates. An activist or political party may, for example, remain strident in its criticism of the regime even after incorporation. Yet because incorporation generates perceptions of having "sold out," it strips the incorporated of their credibility, irrespective of their post-incorporation behavior.
[52] *Interview 5*, September 2019.
[53] Field Notes, September 2019.
[54] For more on the post-2011 artistic and cultural pursuits of some former February 20th Movement activists, see Hachimi, "From Activism to Artivism: New Forms of Youth Activism in the Aftermath of the February 20th Movement," *Euromesco Policy Brief*. January 29th, 2016.

common is a vision of gradual reform through cultural change. This sentiment was expressed well by one former activist and CSO founder: "[We realized] that it's not just the democracy of the system that matters, but also the democracy of society….how can you have a democratic state without democratic people?"[55] Another interlocutor active in civil society agreed, offering the example of paying bribes:

> We have to be an example for a new culture. I don't pay bribes. Don't say institutions are corrupt and then [give a bribe]....Because if I don't give a bribe and you don't give a bribe, and others don't give a bribe, in a year, you'll go to the same institution and get the document you need that same day without giving a bribe. So this is the culture we are talking about.[56]

Views such as these capture the logic behind the decision of many former protest participants to spurn collective street protest—what another interlocutor bemoaned as just "shouting"[57]—for individual initiative. "Maybe it will take 50 or 60 years," but through gradual cultural transformation, many in this camp seem to believe, Morocco will democratize.[58]

Yet if those activists who turned to civil society remain committed to the February 20th Movement's political goals over the long run, they have largely eschewed political confrontation with the regime in the short term. Some of this is out of necessity:

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https://www.euromesco.net/publication/from-activism-to-artivism-new-forms-of-youth-activism-in-the-aftermath-of-20-february-movement/

[55] *Interview 25*, November 2019.
[56] *Interview 15*, October 2019.
[57] *Interview 26*, December 2019.
[58] *Interview 10*, October 2019.

Moroccan civil society is regulated by the Ministry of Interior, from which organizations must receive approval to raise funds, hold events, or rent office space. In practice, this means CSO activists must be careful with their words and actions.[59] As one activist who has worked with many CSOs, but who is skeptical of their impact, put it: "You do advocacy and stuff, but you end up getting closer to the institutions that you were first criticizing."[60] While the 2011 protests led to new civil society organizations staffed by young activists, they "did not lead to a reinvigoration of civil society" or the creation of a "new oppositional dynamic" in the kingdom.[61]

To be sure, there is little sign that CSO activists are all regime apologists, and most other activists are reluctant to judge those who opted for "pragmatism" over confrontation. There is a sense, however, that those who turned to the associative sector after 2011 are "no longer present in the struggles of others" and largely spend their time "writing reports that are ineffective"[62] or otherwise holding events that "don't reach that many people."[63]

There is also a sense, especially palpable when speaking to those outside major cities or without activist backgrounds, that this work is "elitist."[64] As one disenchanted former CSO activist colorfully put it: "Morocco can't be changed in the classical ways—soft power and whatnot. That shit is only in Casablanca and Rabat. I don't know how Morocco will change, but it will be with the people in the markets and the stadiums, not

[59] For more on the apolitical orientation of Moroccan civil society post-2011, see Engelcke, "Morocco's Changing Civil Society," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. January 7th, 2016. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/62417/. For a book-length treatment of civil society in authoritarian contexts, see Jamal (2007).
[60] *Interview 9*, September 2019.
[61] *Interview 37*, February 2020.
[62] *Interview 8*, September 2019.
[63] *Interview 7*, September 2019.
[64] *Interview 4*, September 2019.

the intellectuals."[65] Of course, former February 20th Movement activists who entered civil society have not been co-opted in the same sense as figures like el-Khlifi and Bensalah. Yet their attempts to find solace in non-confrontational cultural work have rendered them politically irrelevant in the eyes of many Moroccans. In sum, the expansion of apolitical civil society organizations following 2011 furthered the sense that the space for political action independent of regime influence was rapidly closing. Coupled with parallel efforts to sideline other voices of the February 20th Movement through more direct forms of co-optation, the regime's pivot toward greater incorporation following the 2011 protests only increased the political exposure of the palace and—as we will see in the next chapter—set the king up for direct confrontation with his people.

4. Co-optation and the "Collapse of Traditional Mediators"

For years, the Moroccan monarchy relied on episodic co-optation to help bolster its public justification for rule as an apolitical arbiter. By incorporating oppositional actors—whether independent political parties like the USFP, PI, and the PJD, or prominent individual activists—into regime-controlled channels, the king could respond to demands for popular representation while implicating his political opposition in unpopular policies and stalled reforms. The arrangement worked well for a time: co-opted actors took the blame for governance failures, while the king escaped unscathed. Yet the relationship between co-optation and legitimation was always fragile, in part because the king's self-presentation as being above the fray of everyday politics

[65] *Interview 41*, February 2020.

depended on at least some of the kingdom's major political actors retaining an independent identity and a modicum of credibility. Put otherwise: for the king to be good but "those around him" bad, the latter must be seen as independent of palace influence. But as the palace progressively co-opted nearly all organized political interests in the kingdom over the course of two decades, it slowly leached opposition forces of their credibility and independent identity. In doing so, the palace simultaneously weakened their ability to absorb popular discontent and deflect blame away from the king. "People used to stop with the government" when criticizing, a civil society activist explained to me.[66] "But now, they go right for the king."

Contemporary opinions about co-opted opposition parties attest to their diminished stature. "The USFP is just a caricature of its former self," one academic and activist explained to me.[67] Another lamented that "the USFP was the strongest opposition party in Morocco, but today it is the party that defends the state, the king, and corruption the most."[68] This declining credibility has been years in the making. "Since the *alternance* government," one Amazigh interlocutor argued, "when [former USFP Prime Minister] Youssoufi returned from exile…this was the beginning of the end for the opposition in Morocco."[69] Another dated the beginning of the decline in opposition credibility to even earlier:

> The PI appeared after independence and a lot of people trusted it, but then it shocked them. And then later USFP, which people trusted a lot, likewise shocked

[66] *Interview 43*, February 2020.
[67] *Interview 2*, July 2019.
[68] *Interview 7*, September 2019.
[69] *Interview 16*, October 2019.

> them. And so people…they consider all of them opportunists that are just concerned with their interests."[70]

This trend has continued apace with the PJD, as one former political prisoner and outspoken activist explained:

> When the USFP let people down, then the PJD arrived and people said these are good people, they believe in God and are religious, so let's give them a chance. But when they came to power, they didn't do anything in the interest of the people either….So people are disillusioned with political parties.[71]

Through several decades of party co-optation, the regime has effectively denuded the opposition of its credibility. Today, in the words of one leftist, "there isn't any party, honestly, that represents a danger [for the regime]. Even the PJD, now they've entered the political game…they've reached their limit."[72]

In theory, this is exactly what co-optation is supposed to do: remove would-be rivals as threats to regime stability and continuity. But it has come with an important—and for the monarchy, dangerous—corollary: it has rendered the political parties not only irrelevant, but indistinguishable from the regime itself. "They are all the same!" one interlocutor told me of the political parties in a line of argument increasingly common among ordinary Moroccans.[73] "They enter and get scared of the palace, and they all

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[70] *Interview 13*, October 2019.
[71] *Interview 7*, September 2019.
[72] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[73] *Interview 14*, October 2019.

become the same. The same policies, the same path….they all work for one interest," regardless of whether they are independent parties or "administrative parties created by the palace." Another interlocutor echoed this sentiment, arguing that "this distinction doesn't really exist anymore. All of the parties have become administrative parties and there isn't any non-administrative party left."[74] The end result is that "there isn't an opposition in the country anymore."[75] "The *makhzen* killed the political game" to such an extent that, for many Moroccans, "all the political parties now are just employees of the king."[76]

This perception has placed the palace in uncharted territory. Hassan II presided over egregious human rights violations and was never keen to share power with the kingdom's independent political parties. Indeed, he is widely suspected of orchestrating the forced disappearance of outspoken socialist leader, and charismatic rival, Mehdi Ben Barka while the latter was in Paris in 1965. Even still, in the recollection of many older interlocutors, the former king was careful not to suffocate his opposition completely. As one veteran journalist and keen observer of Moroccan politics explained to me, "Hassan II was smart enough to know he needed to have a parliament and needed to have elections….and he was smart enough to know he needed to permit some amount of opposition."[77] Another interlocutor in a leadership position with JCA expressed a similar sentiment:

[74] *Interview 5*, September 2019.
[75] *Interview 16*, October 2019.
[76] *Interview 29*, January 2020.
[77] *Interview 37*, February 2020.

> The presence of a strong opposition and a strong government is in the interest of the state and the regime, but they don't see this…With Hassan II, there was more opposition. He and his advisers had a level of awareness to not destroy the credibility of all opposition. They didn't do that. He was smart enough not to do that. [But] Mohammed VI has crossed all the lines.[78]

Even younger interlocutors harbor similar views about the credibility of Morocco's former opposition parties. "The parties and institutions are weak today" one young former PJD-affiliated activist told me.[79] Unlike before, "the political parties can't say no [to the regime]." Another younger leftist offered a similar assessment: "In the 1970s and 80s, parties would say no…but now even Benkirane said he was just an employee of the king."[80] While the accuracy of these sentiments can be debated, the impression remains the same: political parties in Morocco today have little credibility and are increasingly seen as mere extensions of the regime.

And it's not just political parties, either. As detailed in the previous section, the regime's co-optation efforts have also enveloped civil society and have similarly sullied the associative sector's credibility—even if there remain a handful of activist organizations like the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) still willing to confront the authorities.[81] One civil society activist admitted as much:

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[78] *Interview 54*, April 2020.
[79] *Interview 18*, October 2019.
[80] *Interview 35*, January 2020.
[81] AMDH has long been vilified by authorities and has often faced difficulty in carrying out its work. In the years after the 2011 protests, however, authorities escalated their obstruction of the organization, frequently barring them from holding meetings, staging rallies, or opening new branches in Moroccan cities. See here for more details: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/20/morocco-obstruction-rights-group

> There's an impression that even civil society—organizations, youth wings, parties, etc.— they are all part of this general negative impression of institutions. People have a negative impression of organizations, which has some truth to it. It is true that there are a number of organizations [that exist in name only].... But more than that, there are organizations that contribute to chaos and corruption. There are organizations that take advantage of [the poor].[82]

Another civil society activist acknowledged similar difficulties in carrying out their work, explaining that organizations like his are "trapped by the state."[83] Making matters worse, he continued, "the regime dilutes civil society because it encourages so many people to create organizations." But some interlocutors were even less generous in their characterization of Morocco's associative sector. "There isn't any civil society at all," one *Nahj* activist declared.[84] "There are just people who do business, trying to profit and look after their own interests." Another leftist, himself a former civil society actor, was similarly unsparing in his critique of civil society—and Morocco's political and cultural elite more broadly:

> The elite are fake. It's normal that people don't want to listen to the elite because they don't care about normal people. The elites' priorities are not the priorities of ordinary Moroccans. That kind of elite went away with Fatima Mernissi[85], Mehdi

[82] *Interview 15*, October 2019.
[83] *Interview 12*, October 2019.
[84] *Ibid*.
[85] Mernissi was a path-breaking sociologist, academic, and author whose work on Islam and gender won her international acclaim.

> Ben Barka — these were the elite that lived with the people and actually cared about them and knew their priorities….Driss Ksikes[86] —and he's good and a friend of mine—but does he really know the real Morocco? Does he go to fix his iPhone in the *souk*? Does he live among ordinary Moroccans?[87]

Morocco's expansive network of civil society organizations—one of the largest in the Arabic-speaking world—has gone the way of its independent political parties. Neither an incubator for democratic ideals nor an advocate for the concerns of ordinary people, the kingdom's associative sector has also lost its credibility and is increasingly seen as just another arm of the regime.

For decades, the Moroccan regime has sought to incorporate oppositional actors, whether in political parties or civil society, into regime-controlled channels or otherwise denude them of their credibility. In the words of one journalist and activist now living in exile, "The regime tries to sideline anyone who has any credibility so that there is no alternative—even if you're just a rapper."[88] But this has come at a cost: the king's image as an apolitical arbiter uninvolved in everyday politics and not responsible for his kingdom's endemic social, economic, and political problems. Comprehensive co-optation has, as one interlocutor described, led to the "collapse of traditional mediators" who serve as a "firewall between the palace and the people."[89] As a result, ordinary Moroccans

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[86] Ksikes is a prominent former journalist, author, and civil society activist. He was appointed by Mohammed VI in 2019 to serve on a new commission for improving economic and political development in the kingdom. Such royal commissions have become a fixture of Moroccan politics and are typically non-confrontational in their recommendations. For more, see here: http://www.mapexpress.ma/actualite/societe-et-regions/biographie-m-driss-ksikes-designe-sm-roi-membre-commission-speciale-modele-developpement/

[87] *Interview 41*, February 2020.

[88] *Interview 51*, April 2020.

[89] *Interview 37*, February 2020.

today increasingly see the king for who he is: a political player like any other who deserves as much blame as the corrupt political and cultural elite who surround him. One journalist and activist captured this development particularly well:

> People have come to see that he [the king] is the one who controls, in a direct way, political life...he's found himself naked and now he doesn't have someone that can protect him from his critics...they could be politicians, they could be civil society activists—but there aren't any civil society activists. He has destroyed them. He puts the baton in the wheel of the political activists. And so he has come into direct confrontation with the street, with public opinion.[90]

Another civil society activist expressed a similar sentiment:

> The regime has depleted, and also killed, every institution that could be an intermediary. They have killed them. They killed parties, they killed unions, they killed civil society, and they are now fighting soccer ultras, fighting journalists. In the end the regime will find itself by itself with us, with the masses.[91]

Among ordinary Moroccans, then, there is a growing frustration with the entire political system, including the king:

[90] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[91] *Interview 22*, November 2019.

> People feel like they've been cheated (*shmtou*) and they don't trust the authorities anymore. They no longer believe it's really the government that's responsible. They think it's the king and the monarchy….the government and ministries are just puppets.[92]

In Morocco, the palace's co-optation has been ruthlessly effective. But it has irreparably harmed the regime's legitimation strategy, putting the king on a collision course with an increasingly angry and defiant population. "They have beaten the mediators, the journalists, the parties, and the opposition," one Islamist explained.[93] "Now, they are in direct confrontation with the people."

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While in the years preceding 2011 open confrontation of the king by ordinary Moroccans remained relatively rare, the February 20th Movement "opened Pandora's Box"[94]: it signaled the beginning of a new era in the dynamics of opposition in Morocco in which long-sacrosanct red lines would be tested and breached. "We can't go backwards from here," explained one activist, "because we've started to talk about things now that we never could have talked about before."[95] Yet those doing the talking were not opposition parties or outspoken political elites—groups whose ranks have been thinned by rising political repression and comprehensive co-optation. Instead, they were ordinary

[92] *Interview 45*, February 2020.
[93] *Interview 54*, April 2020.
[94] *Interview 34*, January 2020.
[95] *Interview 41*, February 2020.

Moroccans, often politically unaffiliated, for whom the February 20th Movement and expanding access to digital networking tools raised their political consciousness, lowered their thresholds of mobilization, and took away their fear. Combined with a charismatic prime minister who implicated the king in unpopular policies, and a growing impression that the space for political action independent of the palace was rapidly closing, the king was left politically exposed. Though he successfully defused protests with swift promises of reform, promises alone would not be sufficient. Faced with unprecedented scrutiny and sky-high expectations, the monarchy needed to deliver. Instead, the palace reprised the strategy it first deployed in the late 1990s, doubling down on co-optation to sideline oppositional voices while making insincere gestures toward democratic and economic reform. But in doing so, the palace began to test the limits of its legitimation strategy. Its increasingly comprehensive co-optation was eroding the distinction between the king and those around him, making the monarch vulnerable to criticism and blame.

CHAPTER SIX

Commander of the Faithless: Protest and Red Lines in a Changing Morocco

On October 28th, 2016, fishmonger Mohcine Fikri was crushed to death at the hands of local authorities in the back of a garbage truck after being caught selling swordfish out of season. Fikri had jumped into the truck in a desperate attempt to save his catch, worth an estimated $11,000[1]—far more than most Moroccans might expect to earn in a year. A police officer then ordered the truck driver to turn on the compactor, killing Fikri almost immediately, but not before bystanders could capture his final moments on video. The footage[2] quickly spread across Moroccan social media, accompanied by the hashtag "crush his mother"—the callous command that ended Fikri's life.[3] Spontaneous protests soon broke out in Hoceima, the port city where Fikri lived, and then spread across the impoverished Rif region in Morocco's north. But the protests over his death quickly turned into something much bigger as years of political marginalization, failed development projects, and unfulfilled promises pushed Moroccans across the long-neglected Rif to protest in huge numbers. A charismatic, politically-unaffiliated activist named Nasser Zefzafi emerged as a leader for the incipient movement, rallying protesters and excoriating authorities in fiery speeches delivered during protests and viral videos

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/world/middleeast/protests-erupt-in-morocco-over-fish-vendors-death-in-garbage-compactor.html
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhzp_yNvV1I&ab_channel=MoroccanMulticast
[3] A less literal, but more accurate, translation of "crush his mother," or "طحن مو" in Moroccan Arabic, might be "crush the motherfucker" or "crush the hell out of him." While witnesses reported hearing such an order from one of the police officers involved in the incident, official reports claim no such order was ever given and that Fikri's death was an accident.

uploaded to YouTube. Thus "Hirak Rif" was born—a protest movement that would reverberate far deeper, and challenge the monarchy far more, than the February 20th Movement ever did.

On the surface, the protest movement's demands were less controversial than in 2011. There were no calls for a new, "democratic constitution" or a "King who reigns but doesn't rule." The major political currents that helped organize—and sometimes constrain—the February 20th Movement protests were uninvolved. And at first, protests remained concentrated in Hoceima and other nearby towns in the region like Imzouren, Fikri's hometown. But as authorities stepped up repression to contain the largely peaceful protests and arrested leaders like Zefzafi, demonstrations spread, reverberating across the kingdom and drawing crowds that often exceeded 2011 levels. Unlike in 2011, however, there would be no unprecedented royal speech promising swift reforms or a new constitution. No activists were tapped to join state institutions or palace-friendly parties. And with the last former opposition party, the PJD, already in power, there could be no repeat of the strategy the palace pursued in 2011 and before with the *alternance* government.

But most strikingly, while Hirak Rif protesters didn't call for changes in how the king rules like in 2011, they left no doubt about who they held responsible for development failures and unfulfilled promises. The elected officials and political parties sent by the palace to mediate had no credibility in protesters' eyes—and so they called on the king directly to assume responsibility. In doing so, they garnered sympathy across

Morocco and, in the words of one seasoned activist and academic, "caught the regime naked."[4]

This chapter argues that the palace's long-time strategy of pairing co-optation with superficial promises of reform finally "reached its limit"[5] with Hirak Rif and, as a result, protesters began to confront the king directly—his image as an apolitical arbiter strained beyond credulity. Protesters' calls for the king to assume direct responsibility, in other words, demonstrated the effect of years of co-optation on legitimation. But beyond the protest arena, this chapter also argues that the explosion of criticism, rumor, and insult in popular culture and everyday discourse that followed on the heels of Hirak Rif can also be interpreted as evidence of legitimation's breakdown. While the king first found himself the target of broad popular criticism and anger in 2013 after his decision to pardon a Spanish pedophile, Hirak Rif protesters' direct appeals to the king—and his perceived indifference to their entreaties—brought confrontation between the palace and ordinary people to new heights. The regime's harsh crackdown on the protest movement, which had managed to win sympathy from a wide swath of Moroccan society, only made matters worse. In everyday discourse, open critique of the king became more common as gossip and rumors about the monarch's personal life swirled. And in popular culture, the monarch became the target of ire, from the increasingly strident lyrics of young rappers to the modest shopkeepers, day laborers, and unemployed who began taking to YouTube to lambast the regime—and increasingly the king himself. With no major political interests left to co-opt, and confronted with the rapid deterioration of the king's image, I argue that the regime was forced to fall back on repression.

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[4] *Interview 21*, July 2019.
[5] *Ibid*.

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Thematically, this chapter analyzes the decisive breakdown of legitimation with the emergence of Hirak Rif and the concomitant escalation of criticism, insult, and rumor about the king in popular culture and everyday discourse. While Chapter 4 examined 2011's February 20th Movement, which forced the regime to turn once again to co-optation and promises of liberalization, this chapter explores another outbreak of protest and dissent. Unlike in 2011, however, the king was not spared. Instead, he became the target of unprecedented public criticism, the net effect of two successive rounds of co-optation. And unlike during *alternance* and in the years following 2011, the regime was unable to pursue co-optation, forcing it instead to sharply increase repression to levels not seen since before Hassan II first began to embrace political pluralism in the 1990s. Theoretically, this chapter demonstrates the consequences of legitimation's breakdown on both popular dissent and regime reproduction strategies. After opponents of the monarchy successfully leveraged the king's hypocrisy vis-à-vis his public claims against him, direct criticism of the king became both more widespread and radical as preference falsification broke down for many and the "hidden transcript" of dissent bubbled to the surface. The regime's subsequent turn to repression, meanwhile, represented a rebalancing among its reproduction strategies to offset the declining utility of co-optation and legitimation.

The chapter proceeds in three parts. In part one, I return to the politically-charged years immediately following the February 20th Movement and examine early indications that ordinary Moroccans were growing skeptical of the myth at the heart of the monarchy's legitimation claim—that "the king is good, but those around him are bad." I focus especially on the unprecedented protests over the king's decision to pardon a convicted pedophile in 2013.

In parts two and three, I then examine the impact of the breakdown of legitimation on the protest arena and on popular culture and everyday discourse. Beginning with the protest arena, in part two I analyze the dynamics of the Hirak Rif protest movement. I focus in particular on the rhetoric of its leader Nasser Zefzafi. I argue that Zefzafi managed to garner sympathy from Moroccans across the kingdom in part by appealing to a shared sense that traditional mediators like political parties and civil society had no credibility and therefore that the king must bear responsibility for his unfulfilled promises of economic and political development. Other protests since Hirak Rif have evinced a similar aversion to traditional organizing structures. Finally, in part three I turn to the impact of legitimation's breakdown on popular culture and everyday discourse. I focus in particular on popular rappers and YouTube commentators whose growing defiance of norms around the monarchy has generated headlines and landed many in jail. They are joined by ordinary Moroccans whose increased willingness to speak negatively about the king is palpable in everyday conversations and online, where all manner of criticism, insult, and gossip about the king abounds.

1. Ending the Myth of the Good King with Bad Advisers

In early August 2013, an anonymous source with knowledge of royal activities called a reporter from *Lakome* with an explosive tip: the king intended to include a Spanish pedophile convicted of raping nearly a dozen Moroccan children among those he would pardon[6] on Throne Day, a national holiday commemorating the monarch's ascension to the throne. Reporters for *Lakome*—one of the few independent media outlets remaining in the kingdom—quickly got busy confirming the Spaniard's identity as Daniel Galván Viña before going public with their story.[7] What happened next sent shockwaves throughout the kingdom and rattled the walls of the palace. Activists quickly took to the internet to organize a protest while others called attention to the story, posted on *Lakome*'s website. Within 48 hours of the story's publication, demonstrators again filled the broad thoroughfare running through central Rabat that played host to countless protests by the February 20th Movement just two years before. Only this time protesters' chants weren't directed toward royal advisers or the parliament in front of which they assembled, but rather the monarch himself. Video captured by bystanders showed protesters attacking the king's decision while shouting in unison, "No to rape!" and "Long love the people!" the latter being a variation on the slogan commonly shouted by royalists and other so-called "*baltagiyyas*."[8] Moroccans were just as direct in their

[6] The king retains broad, unchecked pardon powers and customarily pardons or commutes the sentences of prisoners on national holidays.
[7] *Interview 35*, January 2020.
[8] As protests spread across the MENA region in early 2011, in Morocco mysterious, pro-monarchy groups began to organize counter demonstrations to discredit the burgeoning February 20th Movement. Much like the *baltagiyya* in Egypt, these actors often violently disrupted protest marches and incited violence, all while declaring their loyalty to the king with cries of "long live the king!" And like the *baltagiyya*, these people were accorded a name, *'ayasha*..

critique online; a sample of Twitter and Facebook comments compiled contemporaneously by *al-Monitor* is suggestive: "The king has forsaken his children for Spain," "At what cost does he [the king] protect his precious tourism industry?" "This wasn't the work of the *makhzen*, this wasn't the work of corrupt politicians, it was the work of our king."[9] For the first time in contemporary Moroccan history, "the king was on the front line of criticism."[10]

But it was not just the target of the demonstrators and the content of their slogans that were unprecedented; so too was their makeup. Indeed, the protests attracted many unaffiliated and apolitical citizens who had remained on the sidelines in 2011, indicating not only increased politicization among ordinary Moroccans, but also a lowered threshold for mobilization. One well-connected activist who helped organize the Rabat demonstrations marveled at the turnout, recalling an "enormous" (*ha'l*) crowd filled with "people who had never come out before [and] not just the professional activists."[11] Given the makeup of the protesters and their public defiance of red lines vis-a-vis the king, many other interlocutors characterized the protests over what became known as "Danielgate" as a turning point for popular discourse about the king. In this regard, one called the incident "the most important event post-2011."[12] Ultimately, security forces violently dispersed the demonstrations, but protesters' unprecedented criticism yielded an unprecedented response. Over the course of only a few days, the palace released multiple communiqués—a rarity in a kingdom where the royal cabinet operates behind the scenes

[9] "'DanielGate' Sparks Moroccan Political Unrest," *al-Monitor*. August 16th, 2013. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/08/morocco-pedophile-release-king-backlash.html#ixzz77ECxtjSV
[10] *Interview 35*, January 2020.
[11] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[12] *Interview 34*, January 2020.

by design—first denying the king's involvement, then promising an investigation, and finally retracting the pardon altogether.

It would be easy to read this event as unrelated to legitimation and the palace's increasingly comprehensive co-optation efforts described in previous chapters. After all, resentment toward Westerners and the tourism industry had been growing in Morocco, especially given the kingdom's very real problem with sex trafficking. To be sure, Moroccans who took to the streets and online to confront their king following Galván's pardon were not criticizing his violation of promises of democratic reform or economic development. Yet their direct targeting of the king suggested that the myth that helped make his promises in 2011 (and in 1999) credible was no longer tenable—that is, the myth that "the king is good, but those around him are bad."[13] Protesters didn't target royal advisers—though the palace tried to implicate them in the flurry of statements it released in response. They targeted the king himself. As one interlocutor who himself retained some belief in the king's virtue until "Danielgate" explained: "the capital of the king against the February 20th Movement was the [myth]," but in the years following the movement, this capital "began to run out"[14]—and for some, the decisive turning point was 2013. In other words, comprehensive co-optation, coupled with unfulfilled promises of reform, progressively sapped the monarchy of its "capital." The events of "Danielgate," in turn, helped demonstrate the extent to which this "capital" had already deteriorated only 2 years after palace-backed constitutional reforms intended to replenish it were unveiled. As a result, by 2013 people were more willing to directly criticize the

[13] For more on this common expression and its declining resonance, see Bennani-Chraïbi, "'The king is Good, the Political Class is Bad': A Tired Myth," *Jadaliyya*. September 5th, 2017. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34540

[14] *Interview 41*, February 2020.

king—and not "those around him." As one young activist compellingly put it: "it is impossible that, after 20 years, the king does not know that those around him are bad."[15]

"Danielgate" was not the only indication that ordinary Moroccans were increasingly willing to cross red lines around the monarchy in the politically charged, post-2011 environment. In early 2012, 18-year-old Walid Bahomane posted a video to Facebook featuring a montage of unflattering caricatures of the king accompanied by a voice-over with insults like, "the king hates his people" and "People are made to obey."[16] After his arrest, AMDH helped publicize his case, while online a Facebook page supporting Bahomane attracted scores of followers. Titled "Mohammed VI, my freedom is more sacred than you," the page invited users to post other caricatures of the king[17]—a practice which had become more common with expanding access to digital networking tools, especially following the 2011 protests.[18] In a separate incident shortly after Bahomane's arrest, a young man from Taza named Abdessamad Hiddour was arrested after a video of him denouncing the king's economic predation caught authorities' attention online. In the shaky video[19], a crowd gathers around an animated Hiddour and another interlocutor as they criticize the king's economic policies for letting foreigners "continue colonizing the country." Then, Hiddour turns to "the colonizer who is now in

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[15] *Interview 36*, February 2020.
[16] https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/02/07/internacional/1328643154.html; see also: https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/8856/jeune-marocain-arrete-pour-atteinte.html
[17] https://globalvoices.org/2012/02/08/morocco-busted-for-posting-caricatures-of-the-king-on-facebook
[18] Caricaturing the king was not an entirely new phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter 3, figures like Khalid Gueddar and Ahmed Snoussi broke ground for portraying Mohammed VI and Hassan II in caricature for Morocco's burgeoning independent press in the decades prior. Yet the dawn of Facebook and other digital networking tools, combined with the declining space for criticism in traditional media, led to a profusion of caricatures and memes about the king online—especially following the 2011 protests. For a profile of one such online caricaturist, who uses the pseudonym Curzio, see Errazzouki, "Mediums of Outrage: Curzio's Political Cartoons on Morocco," *Jadaliyya*. November 7th, 2013. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29758
[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afGfdWmPg48&ab_channel=Tazakom

Rabat, Mohammed VI," who he labels a "dog" and a "dictator" as others look on, listening intently. Both Hiddour and Bahomane were sentenced to jail time and ordered to pay significant fines as a result of their actions[20], punishments which no doubt helped draw even greater attention to their cases and the content of their insults. The incidents were significant for at least two other reasons, as well. First, they helped demonstrate the growing power of the internet for spreading norm-defying speech vis-a-vis the monarchy at a time when empty promises and comprehensive co-optation had left the king increasingly exposed. But perhaps more importantly, along with "Danielgate," the incidents signaled that it would increasingly be ordinary Moroccans who dared to publicly cross red lines in the wake of the February 20th Movement—and not just a small group of intrepid journalists and outspoken political elite.

Indeed, in what would prove to be the final nail in the coffin for Morocco's brief experiment with press liberalization, authorities arrested Ali Anouzla, the founder of *Lakome* credited with breaking the "Danielgate" story, just a month after the unprecedented protests. As had become common, authorities used a false pretext to justify his arrest. This time, it was particularly far-fetched: Anouzla was charged with "apology for terrorism" after linking in an article he wrote to another article in the Spanish daily *El País*, which in turn featured a link to an al-Qaeda video. The video, which Anouzla denounced as "propaganda," called out Mohammed VI for ruling over a "kingdom of corruption and despotism."[21] Authorities subsequently blocked access to *Lakome*, shuttering the site for good—and adding it to the growing list of media outlets

[20] https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/2528
[21] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/moroccan-king-backs-away-from-reforms/2013/10/01/27ecfe78-2ac4-11e3-b139-029811dbb57f_story.html

forced shut by authorities for defying red lines.[22] While Anouzla's coverage of the king's pardon resulted in unprecedented protests and spurred his arrest, his earlier articles likely also contributed to his targeting by authorities. Anouzla had over the previous two years broached many sensitive topics in *Lakome*, comparing the annual cost of the Moroccan monarchy to its Spanish counterpart, for instance, and commenting on the king's extensive international travels and vacations in trenchant opinion articles.[23] Though Anouzla was released from jail after only five months, the charges against him were never dropped—representing what one human rights defender called a "sword of Damocles."[24] In a trajectory similar to the other trailblazing journalists that preceded him, Anouzla largely kept to himself after his arrest and imprisonment. One interlocutor close to the journalist noted that "[he] was deeply affected by his experience in prison" and once he left, "he stopped working in journalism completely."[25]. After a brief reprieve—forced on the regime by the 2011 protests—the independent press thus continued its downward trajectory.

But as journalists and media outlets grow more reluctant to test red lines, ordinary Moroccans have grown less so. "They are following opposite trajectories"[26], one interlocutor and former journalist observed, commenting on self-censorship in Morocco after 2011. A transition that began in the years before the February 20th Movement—when Yassine Belassal's perceived contempt of the king rallied the support of Morocco's

[22] Indeed, another outlet headed by Anouzla, *al-Jarida al-Oula*, was forced shut in 2009 due to mounting legal costs. *Mamfakinch*, the citizen-journalist hub detailed in Chapter 4, ceased publication in 2014 after authorities gained access to the group's private communications by sending a malicious link, disguised as an anonymous tip, to one of the publication's editors via email. For more, see Errazzouki (2017). Numerous other media outlets were forced shut in the years preceding 2011. For more, see Chapter 4.
[23] https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/in-depth/features/free-press-morocco-point-lord-copper-1977701565
[24] *Interview 32*, January 2020.
[25] *Interview 46*, March 2020.
[26] *Interview 39*, February 2020.

nascent blogosphere and Mouad Belghouat's song incited popular criticism of the king—thus accelerated after the movement's demobilization. The brazen protests after the king's pardon of a pedophile and the growing cases of *lèse-majesté* in the wake of the February 20th Movement illustrated the regime's weakening grip over the machinery of legitimation as it expanded co-optation. Though the journalists willing to criticize the king directly were growing silent, ordinary Moroccans were increasingly filling the gap left in their wake, beginning to wonder whether it really was "those around him" responsible for endemic problems—or, perhaps, the "good king" himself. In this regard, then, the protests of Danielgate, and other forms of direct criticism of the king, were a portent of what was to come.

2. Hirak Rif, "Political Shops," and the New Moroccan Protester

When the Hirak Rif protest movement emerged in late 2016 and proved it had staying power, it caught the Moroccan regime off guard. Unlike the February 20th Movement, none of Morocco's major, organized political interests—political parties, unions, and other groups like JCA—were involved in staging the protests. Officials largely left protesters alone initially, hoping they would run out of steam, even as some political elite attempted to discredit the movement by calling them separatists. But the movement proved resilient, consistently mobilizing huge crowds in Hoceima and across the region. But more concerning for regime officials was their rhetoric and its fast-growing appeal. Through leaders like Nasser Zefzafi, protesters spoke directly to the king. They dismissed as irrelevant the elected officials and "political shops" dispatched

by the palace to mediate. And their calls for follow-through on years of royal promises of economic and democratic development ultimately helped them win sympathy from a wide swath of ordinary people. Hirak Rif was unlike any of the other major protest movements that preceded it in contemporary Morocco. While its leaders have long since been arrested and daily demonstrations repressed, the movement continues to shape the dynamics of legitimation and popular contention in the kingdom today.

In some ways, that a protest movement originating in Morocco's Rif region captured broad public support in the first place was surprising. Systematically deprived of resources under former King Hassan II, the Rif has often been vilified as backwards in official rhetoric and popular culture. Most of those living in the Rif are Amazigh—descendants of the original inhabitants of North Africa. Yet compared with Morocco's other major Amazigh groups in the Souss and Middle Atlas regions, the Riffians are less integrated into Moroccan society and politics, and the region's unique history of resistance to occupation continues to shape both Riffian identity and popular perceptions. In the 1920s, for example, Riffian Abdul Karim el-Khattabi[27] successfully fended off Spanish colonizers and established the independent Rif Republic. The breakaway state endured for five years before finally being toppled by combined French and Spanish forces in 1926 in an asymmetrical conflict that saw widespread use of chemical weapons and indiscriminate aerial bombardment. And in 1958 inhabitants of the region rebelled again, this time against the newly independent Moroccan state, over the region's continued political, economic, and cultural marginalization. Ultimately, the Moroccan

[27] Khattabi would become a vanguard for future revolutionaries of the 20th century like Che Guevara for his pioneering tactics in guerilla warfare and his fierce resistance to colonialism. He was exiled after surrendering in 1926 and never returned to Morocco, even after it gained independence.

Army, led by then-crown prince Hassan II, ruthlessly repressed the uprising, killing thousands. Thus, when protesters took to the streets of Hoceima in outrage in late 2016, they were not just protesting Mohcine Fikri's death, but also generations of accumulated grievances against callous and cruel central authorities. In other words, Fikri's death, as one interlocutor put it, "was like a continuation of their historical repression."[28] In tribute to this proud but painful history, many Hirak Rif demonstrators carried the flag of the Rif Republic, alongside the Moroccan and pan-Amazigh flags. And perhaps for this reason, many political elites first labeled the protesters separatists, hoping to leverage old stereotypes and the region's long history of restiveness against the incipient movement.

These attempts to discredit Hirak Rif, however, ultimately failed, in part because the movement managed to turn allegations of separatism against those who launched them. As one interlocutor, an independent journalist and activist, explained:

> In the beginning they tried to spread this idea [that they were separatists]. There was a meeting with all the leaders of the political parties and a press statement was released saying that they're separatists….But when Zefzafi came out to deliver a statement and said we are not separatists, we are Moroccans and so on, he put an end to it. Ultimately, this pushed [party leaders] to retract what they said and recognize their mistake. This is ultimately what made people understand that, if this is happening in the Rif, it could happen in Casablanca, it could happen in other regions. And so there was broad solidarity after [this event]....People overall

[28] *Interview 25*, November 2019.

> were in solidarity with [the protesters] because they saw them as Moroccans, and they considered themselves Moroccans.[29]

Using YouTube to speak directly to Moroccans outside the Rif, Zefzafi forcefully denied allegations of separatism and, in the process denounced the efforts to drive a wedge between the Rif and the rest of Morocco. His message, conveyed by another interlocutor, was simple: "We are Moroccans who want our rights as Moroccans."[30]

In addition to successfully fending off allegations of separatism, Hirak Rif protesters also advanced demands that could be easily understood by ordinary Moroccans increasingly frustrated by failed promises of development and reform. To be sure, many of the protesters' demands reflected the Rif's unique marginalization. They called for the repeal of the 1958 royal decree that designated the region an active military zone, for example. They also demanded the construction of a specialized oncology center to treat cancer patients, of which there are more per capita in the Rif than anywhere else in the kingdom.[31] But their other demands related to grievances shared by Moroccans across the kingdom disenchanted with years of promises and little follow-through. For example, they called for accountability after the failure of a much-hyped royal initiative intended to bolster development in the region and reverse decades of systematic exclusion. Like other high-profile projects announced by the king to much fanfare, the "Lighthouse of the

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[29] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[30] *Interview 14*, October 2019.
[31] Residents of the region have long attributed disproportionately high cancer rates to the widespread use of chemical weapons by Spanish forces during the Rif War a century ago. For more, see here: https://www.yabiladi.ma/articles/details/63500/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7.html

Mediterranean" initiative[32] underwhelmed—and in this regard, ordinary people across the kingdom could relate.

Throughout Mohammed VI's reign, Moroccans have known numerous marquee initiatives and development models, from the National Initiative for Human Development launched by the king in 2005 to myriad mega projects designed to upgrade infrastructure and transform Morocco into a regional economic and cultural hub. But each failed to reduce yawning inequality, materially improve the lives of Morocco's working class majority, or substantively address the astounding disparities between the kingdom's urban core and rural periphery. Indeed, as one long-time human rights defender noted grimly, "You go 40 kilometers from Rabat and you are in the Middle Ages."[33] Or, as another veteran activist put it:

> There isn't work. There aren't any hospitals. There aren't any schools. There aren't roads. We have a TGV, but we have people in the mountains that still ride on donkeys. We have a development model that benefits 10%, but an entire 90% doesn't benefit at all. This can't continue. If you look at Casablanca, there are some places in Casablanca you would say to yourself, 'This is like Las Vegas.' But in this same Casablanca, you go to other areas and you would say you were in the 19th century![34]

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[32] For more on the failed development program, which was announced by the king from Hoceima following a devastating earthquake in the city in 2004, see here: https://www.hespress.com/%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D9%85%D9%8F%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AB%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B2%D9%84-509114.html

[33] *Interview 32*, January 2020.

[34] *Interview 7*, September 2019.

Protesters in the Rif were able to tap into anger over these disparities and convey a sense that Mohammed VI had little to show for his nearly two decades on the throne. As one Amazigh activist explained, the lack of progress "revealed that there isn't anyone managing these political and economic projects that plundered regions and completely inhibited them, essentially throughout all of Mohammed VI's 20 year of rule."[35] In the end, underdeveloped regions like the Rif "remained marginalized, even though some new projects came during the 'new era'….So these past twenty years we've been talking about the National Initiative for Human Development and a number of other projects. But all of this was just talk. They didn't work. They didn't do anything." The economic marginalization experienced by those living in the Rif was thus not dissimilar to what many Moroccans were also experiencing—and neither was their sense of disillusionment after years of unfulfilled promises and failed initiatives. And so, despite their unique history of marginalization, the message Hirak Rif protesters carried resonated broadly.[36]

But perhaps most importantly, what made Hirak Rif such a threat to the regime was the bluntness—and seeming legitimacy—of their message: when will the promises given and projects outlined in royal speeches ever be implemented? And when will the king take responsibility for his words? For example, in one viral video Zefzafi recorded at home explicitly in *Darija*—as opposed to the Tamazight dialect spoken in the Rif—so

[35] *Interview 23*, November 2019.
[36] Hirak Rif protesters were aided in their efforts to communicate the legitimacy of their demands by Hamid Mahdaoui, an independent journalist and founder of the news platform *Badil*. Using YouTube videos to defend the protesters and highlight the reasonableness of their demands, Mahdaoui helped popularize Hirak Rif at a time when official media largely ignored the protests. Mahdaoui also developed a reputation for being unafraid to criticize the king directly, and his YouTube channel achieved a wide following. Like other journalists that test red lines, however, Mahdaoui was ultimately arrested on false pretenses and sentenced to several years in prison. For more, see:https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/18/morocco-journalist-convicted-dubious-charge.

as to reach more people, he turned to the words of the king himself, calling for him to take responsibility:

> The king himself made speeches. Speech after speech, asking 'where is the wealth' and 'connecting accountability to responsibility.' But I haven't seen anything. They're just slogans in the speeches. Words need to be translated into action. Responsibility should be coupled with accountability. And the king himself recognized this! ...So take accountability!"[37]

By grounding his words in the king's own promises, Zefzafi gave Hirak Rif's demands a de facto legitimacy. And he also tapped into a widely-held—if seldom expressed—sentiment. In this regard, one interlocutor's view is perhaps representative: "You know what? 99% of his majesty's speeches I agree with. The problem is they are never applied….The king himself doesn't want them to be applied. He just lies to us."[38] For years, Mohammed VI used his ritualized speeches to Moroccans to outline new economic development projects and political reforms—all while dressing down politicians and other officials when reality failed to live up to the king's lofty rhetoric. In doing so, he helped bolster the legitimating image he had long sought to cultivate for himself: that of a benevolent reformer above the political fray. But with Hirak Rif, after years of unfulfilled promises and aggressive co-optation, Moroccans were learning to use the king's promises

[37] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPPm-KjFhis&ab_channel=hespressHD
[38] *Interview 41*, February 2020.

to legitimize their own demands—and beginning to call for accountability at the very top.[39]

Indeed, while development failures and unfulfilled promises were nothing new in Morocco, what was new was that Hirak Rif protesters were increasingly willing to publicly place the blame at the feet of the king—and not simply "those around him."[40] Thus when the palace dispatched elected representatives from the region to mediate, protesters balked, demanding to meet with representatives of the king instead. Addressing a crowd of protesters in Hoceima shortly before his arrest, for example, Zefzafi spoke directly to the king while disregarding the politicians sent by the palace:

> We are addressing you, the king, because you're king of the country and the head of state. The gang you sent here [is useless]....And your absence from the scene shows us that you don't want reconciliation with the region. It confirms that you are absent from the concerns of the people.[41]

In another video, recorded in front of an abandoned development project in Hoceima, Zefzafi dismisses elected officials as simply fronts for what he calls "political shops"

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[39] As Scott (1990), O'Brien (2006) and others elucidate, critiques of leaders grounded in their own language can be especially powerful and persuasive, particularly for loyal supporters. See the discussion in Chapter 2, section 3.1.

[40] As I clarify at the end of Chapter 3, section 2, I argue that the Moroccan monarchy's contemporary legitimation strategy revolves around the image of the king as a neutral arbiter, not claims about delivering inclusive economic growth. The two are related, however: as comprehensive co-optation progressively thinned the ranks of Morocco's independent political actors and taxed the monarchy's image, it left the king vulnerable to criticism for governance failures, including economic ones. One implication of this argument is that, had the regime not engaged in expansive co-optation, other political actors might have been able to redirect popular anger over unfulfilled promises of economic development away from the king.

[41] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7FyYQ6Edtw&ab_channel=Th3Legend

(*dakakin siyasiya*) while making it clear protesters wanted accountability from the very top:

> I always direct my words at the king. Because we do not recognize the governor, we do not recognize the political shops, and we do not recognize the pawns. Our words are directed toward the king. The king knows what is happening here. He needs to intervene...the responsibility rests with the king, and not with anyone else.[42]

Zefzafi and other Hirak Rif protesters ultimately understood that the myth of the apolitical king was just that—a myth. The king was a political actor as responsible as any other for failed projects and broken promises. By articulating this plainly and repeatedly, protesters put the palace in an uncomfortable, and unprecedented, position. As one interlocutor explained, when protesters said "we want to talk to the one who is responsible [the king] and not some minister," they caused a "profound crisis of the system."[43] Zefzafi's denouncement of the "political shops" was particularly "dangerous for the regime"[44] because it circumvented the layers of authority designed to deflect blame and responsibility away from the king, while simultaneously capturing the widely-held sentiment that political organizations were merely pawns for the regime with little

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[42] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqEeQ_imtD4&ab_channel=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81

[43] *Interview 21*, July 2019.

[44] *Interview 38*, February 2020.

independence. Many Moroccans could thus relate to Zefzafi's rhetoric, as one interlocutor explained:

> It's a very smart phrase that represents what a lot of people who have lost trust in political organizations feel. As soon as elections end, the parties close their shops and leave. This is the feeling we all have, even those who aren't politically active. The regime itself deals with the parties as if they were just shops....Ultimately all the keys to the parties are with the regime. They are the ones who open and close them....[So] why is there money for new train stations and a TGV but not for education and health? Why are there huge gaps between the major cities and rural areas? People know the answer to these questions lies with the king [and not the parties].[45]

Zefzafi's denouncement of the "political shops" thus became a convenient shorthand for the whole system of politicians who have no real power and merely exploit their positions to enhance their wealth. Recognizing this reality, protesters concluded that, if the politicians aren't in charge, then it must be the king. Ultimately, as another interlocutor observed: "the people of the Rif rejected mediation from the parties because they saw that the king is the one who runs things….He doesn't have that same protection anymore."[46] Co-optation, in other words, no longer protected the king from public scrutiny or political blame, in part because it had been so successful. With most of the kingdom's organized political interests—the political shops denounced by Zefzafi—sidelined via years of co-

[45] *Interview 43*, February 2020.
[46] *Interview 51*, April 2020.

optation or otherwise sapped of their credibility, the king was now increasingly exposed. Faced with the first major protest movement since 2011 protests, he was thus unable to escape public blame.

Meanwhile, as the king remained silent and protests endured, authorities stepped up repression. Auxiliary forces from across the kingdom were deployed to Hoceima and other towns in the Rif where they aggressively sought to prevent public demonstrations of any kind, leading to the arrest of hundreds of peaceful protesters and numerous injuries.[47] But the harshest treatment was reserved for Zefzafi and other protest leaders. After being arrested in late May 2017, Zefzafi was allegedly tortured and, along with other leaders, charged with grave crimes.[48] One such crime, "threatening state security, " carries the death penalty.[49] As many interlocutors attested, even for those Moroccans who didn't support the protest movement, the charges and their potential penalties were "shocking"[50] and "seemed unusual."[51] Indeed, shortly after Zefzafi's arrest, a massive solidarity march was organized in Rabat, drawing a crowd that rivaled—or perhaps exceeded—what the February 20th Movement had managed 6 years prior.[52] Thus when it was announced that the king would deliver his annual throne day speech from Hoceima

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[47] In addition to deploying relatively violent means to disperse protests, authorities restricted access to the region and intermittently throttled internet and messaging services. For more, see: https://www.accessnow.org/morocco-complete-blackout-protests-al-hoceima/; and also: https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/07/morocco-hirak-rif-police-brutality-protests.html

[48] For more on allegations of torture and mistreatment, see: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/22/morocco-protest-leader-alleges-police-beat-him

[49] In 2018, Zefzafi was ultimately sentenced to twenty years in prison—a sentence that was upheld on appeal. For more on the verdicts and irregularities during the judicial process, see: https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/10/morocco-shocking-verdict-against-activists-journalist

[50] *Interview 34*, January 2020.

[51] *Interview 3*, July 2019.

[52] https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/morocco-protesters-flood-rabat-solidarity-rif-region; see also: https://ledesk.ma/live/rabat-grande-manifestation-en-solidarite-avec-le-hirak/ and https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/06/12/maroc-a-rabat-on-manifeste-en-masse-en-soutien-au-mouvement-d-al-hoceima_5143108_3212.html

in July 2017, many hoped the monarch would finally intervene. As one interlocutor who was working with the families of Hirak Rif detainees at that time explained, "they thought the king would give their sons and daughters a pardon" and take responsibility for development failures in the region.[53] Nasser Zefzafi's father, for his part, told reporters in advance of the speech that "I have nothing to say to the government. I address my grievances to the highest authority...with one phone call, all of this can be resolved."[54] Traveling to the very heart of the Rif, Mohammed VI seemed poised to finally address the protests, which by the summer of 2017 had become the kingdom's most significant and sustained protest movement since the Arab Spring.

Those hoping for royal intervention and accountability, however, were sorely disappointed. Disavowing responsibility, the king offered no concessions in his speech. Nor did he pardon Zefzafi or other prominent protesters, letting down the families of the detainees as well as the ordinary Moroccans who had hoped the monarch would respond to protesters' seemingly legitimate demands. Instead, he sought to pin the blame, as always, on elected officials. But this time, he was unusually harsh—and seemingly on the defensive over his record:

> All in all, our development policy choices remain sound. The problem lies with mentalities that have not evolved as well as with the inability to implement projects and to innovate….When results are positive, political parties, politicians and officials vie for the spotlight to derive benefits from the achievements made, both politically and in terms of media exposure. However, when matters do not

[53] *Interview 34*, January 2020.
[54] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-morocco-protests-idUSKBN1961KV

> turn out the way they should, they hide behind the Royal Palace and ascribe everything to it. As a result, citizens complain to the king about government services or officials that take too long to respond to their queries or process their cases, asking him to intercede on their behalf.[55]

But instead of announcing concessions or addressing the substance of protesters' demands, the king continued dressing down elected officials over their alleged incompetence. He complained that "when it comes to engaging the citizens and solving their problems, [the parties] do nothing and are non-existent....Enough is enough!....Either fully carry out your obligations or withdraw from public life."[56] Perhaps most disappointing for supporters and sympathizers of Hirak Rif, however, was the king's full-throated praise for the security forces sent to the region to quell the unrest:

> Given this regrettable and dangerous vacuum, law enforcement services have found themselves face to face with the citizens. They have bravely and patiently fulfilled their duty, showing restraint and commitment to the rule of law as they maintained security and stability. I am referring to Hoceima, but what happened there could actually occur in any other region….Law enforcement officers are making major sacrifices, working day and night in difficult conditions to fulfil their duty, maintain the internal and external security and stability of the homeland, and safeguard the security, serenity and tranquility of citizens. Moroccans have every right and ought, in fact, to be proud of their law-

[55] https://www.maroc.ma/en/royal-speeches/full-text-royal-speech-occasion-throne-day
[56] *ibid.*

> enforcement authorities. I say this loud and clear, without any inferiority complex: if certain nihilists do not want to admit this, or refuse to tell the truth, it is their problem – and theirs alone.[57]

The king's speech was not well-received.[58] Indeed, if Zefzafi and other Hirak leaders won popular support and put the palace in the spotlight by calling on the king to assume responsibility for stalled reforms and unfulfilled promises, the king made matters worse by appearing indifferent to their demands. As one interlocutor explained:

> The final straw for [the king's image] was the Hirak Rif issue. This was the final straw, the way he dealt with it, but also the way he didn't respond [to protesters]. It's like he abandoned a huge part of Morocco, he didn't listen to them, he didn't respond to them. Then he goes to give a speech in Hoceima and doesn't even bring the topic up at all. It's just an insolent way—it's a kind of insolence. He was confrontational and insolent [and showed] a lack of respect, an incivility, towards the people of the Rif and especially the people of Hoceima.[59]

The king's perceived disregard for the protesters was particularly damaging for his image in part because so many ordinary Moroccans had come to sympathize with their demands

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[57] *ibid.*
[58] The state-owned 2M channel, which posted the speech on its YouTube channel, even suspended commenting and liking/disliking for the video after it was published because of the overwhelmingly negative reactions it evoked (Field Notes, January 2020).
[59] *Interview 47*, March 2020.

and reject authorities' heavy-handed security response. By refusing to accept responsibility, offer concessions, or issue pardons, the king left many disappointed:

> When Hirak came, a number of people marched in solidarity with them, and a lot of people thought that the king would fix the problem in the Rif. But the king didn't, and a lot of people lost trust in him. And so here's the king, but he doesn't do anything. People went to jail, and everyone waited for them to be released with a royal pardon, and every time a speech came, it was worse than before. He praised the security approach to the Rif, he praised the police forces, they're doing their jobs, etc…And so this created a type of disappointment with the monarchy and the person of the king…. The sympathy people had for Hirak Rif was not like with the February 20th Movement. It was a lot bigger.[60]

Rejecting the "political shops" and elected officials dispatched by the palace to mediate, Hirak Rif protesters put the king in the spotlight in a way that no major protest movement in contemporary Morocco had done before. After years of co-optation and false promises, the king was now faced with a sustained, large-scale protest movement that saw beyond regime rhetoric and the myth of the apolitical monarch. Protesters wanted accountability—not just from the politicians and elected officials routinely blamed (though seldom punished) for problems, but also from the king himself. And in organizing a protest movement without the involvement of Morocco's traditional mediators—actors now viewed more skeptically after years of co-optation—Hirak Rif

[60] *Interview 13*, October 2020.

participants inaugurated "an important new generation of protests."[61] Indeed, many of the protests that have emerged since Hirak Rif have evinced a similar aversion to traditional organizing structures, as one veteran activist commented:

> Currently, if we look at the protests of Jerada or the Rif, they are led by people far outside the political parties. Not all of them…but the majority of them don't have any political experience at all. Meaning the new profile of the protester, the protester of today isn't necessarily in a political party or a union….Actually, it's the opposite, because people don't trust [them] anymore.[62]

As a result of this development, one Islamist activist argued, "the demands will become more controversial [and] the ceiling of demands will now be much higher."[63] No longer, he speculated, will people refrain from calling for the "fall of the regime" or even the removal of the monarchy next time they take to the streets. While such an outcome is far from certain, the palace is nonetheless in uncharted territory. New protesters are following the model set by Hirak Rif, circumventing the traditional mediators that historically served as a firewall between the king and ordinary people.[64] With the king's image as an apolitical arbiter in decline, the king may well face more direct challenges to his rule in the future.

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[61] *Interview 21*, July 2019.
[62] *Interview 7*, September 2019.
[63] *Interview 54*, April 2020.
[64] For example, residents of the marginalized, rural communities of Jerada and Zagora organized major protests over underdevelopment in the wake of Hirak Rif, without the participation of major political parties or unions — though some local activists in Jerada went on to run for office in the 2021 parliamentary elections.

3. Long Live the King? Long Live the People!

While the breakdown of legitimation has not yet yielded large-scale, anti-monarchy protests, it has nonetheless given license to a torrent of direct criticism and insult in popular culture and everyday discourse. Even before the emergence of Hirak Rif and the "Danielgate" protests described in section one, many Moroccans were growing disenchanted with Mohammed VI—and increasingly willing to say so in public, especially among the new generation of young Moroccans who never knew the repression of Hassan II. Even still, when three young, working-class rappers[65] released their norm-busting polemic "Long Live the People" on YouTube in October 2019, it sent shockwaves through the kingdom. Within weeks, the song was viewed by nearly 20 million people—no small feat in a country of 36 million and for a song entirely in Moroccan colloquial Arabic.[66] The song's title is a play on the ritualistic affirmation "Long live the king!" common in Morocco, and its vitriolic lyrics are unambiguous in who they target. It begins by empathizing with the struggles of ordinary Moroccans and their sense of broken promises:

> I am the bruised, the slain, the forgotten
>
> I am the Moroccan citizen whose wounds you deepened
>
> I am the one who swore allegiance and granted his trust but was betrayed

[65] The rappers, known by their stage names, are: *Weld l'Griya*, *Lz3er*, and *Gnawi.*
[66] As of December 2021, the song had been viewed more than 36 million times. It can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiW7ByHWJhg&ab_channel=WeldL%27Griya09

Next, the song makes a callback to an infamous remark made by the king—a billionaire with business interests in nearly all facets of the Moroccan economy—during a speech in 2014 when he asked his fellow citizens, "Where is the wealth? Who is benefiting from it?"[67] The king's question, as *Lakome* founder Ali Anouzla noted at the time, "became a source of hilarity on social networking sites almost as soon as it was uttered," prompting the sarcastic retort, "Where's the wealth? The king of the poor stole it!"[68] "Long Live the People" returns to this episode:

> Don't ask me about this country's wealth
> Which of us has plundered it?
> Who benefits from two seas and the exploitation of the land?
> Who grinds the phosphate and owns the big companies?
> Who grinds the grain for the whole country and now wants more?

The rappers also call out how the authorities instrumentalize accusations of terrorism to stifle criticism of the king:

> The one who speaks for the people and points the finger at the ruler
> They say he's an Islamist extremist, a terrorist, and jail him

But the song's most provocative lines come later. For example, the rappers take the king's formal title as "commander of the faithful" and substitute it with "commander

[67] https://www.maroc.ma/en/royal-speeches/full-text-throne-day-speech-delivered-hm-king-mohammed-vi
[68] https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/columns/moroccos-king-poor-389544184

of the addicts," accusing the king of "wear[ing] the cape of faith" while ignoring widespread poverty and desperation. Next, they intone "Our dog is the sixth, our commander is our tyrant" before building up to the song's dramatic climax, where they subvert the kingdom's national motto, declaring, "God, country, and the third can go away — this is our true anthem." After its release, the song's lyrics found their way into soccer stadiums where fans repeated some of its most provocative lines in unison.[69] Meanwhile, one of the rappers was jailed—ostensibly for "insulting the authorities" in an unrelated Instagram video[70]—while the others have spoken of harassment from regime minders. The authorities even arrested ordinary people for posting lyrics to the song on social media. One of those was 17 year old Ayoub Mahfouz from Meknes, who posted a particularly salacious line from the song, "our dog is the sixth," next to a picture of himself with his dog—an act which earned him several years of jail time, pending appeal, despite his claiming that it was only a joke.[71] That authorities resorted to arresting even ordinary people like Mahfouz suggests, as many interlocutors surmised, that the regime feared the song was destabilizing—a bridge too far in the battle to enforce norms of appropriate speech around the monarchy.[72]

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[69] Field Notes, January 2020.

[70] Authorities arrested *Gnawi*, whose real name is Mohammed Mounir, shortly after the song was released. For more, see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/25/moroccan-rapper-gnawi-court-track-corruption-viral.

[71] For more information on the case of Ayoub Mahfouz, and others arrested for online commentary, see the following report from Human Rights Watch: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/05/morocco-crackdown-social-media-critics

[72] The Moroccan regime has long gone back and forth on how it deals with cases of *lèse-majesté*. Often when someone crosses a red line, they are prosecuted on unrelated, and routinely spurious, charges—in part to not draw attention to the offense. Now faced with an onslaught of direct criticism, as one interlocutor argued, the regime "feels threatened" and wants to "make an example out of ordinary people" (interview 39, February 2020).

Of course, "Long Live the People" was not the first popular song to test red lines around the monarchy or criticize the regime.[73] Even during the so-called "years of lead," when repression was at its peak under Hassan II, the legendary musical group *Nass Ghiwane* managed through their music to condemn corruption and political repression, though always indirectly. But "Long Live the People" went the furthest in terms of vitriol. Whereas previous norm-testing songs stuck to contained criticism and inconspicuous references, "Long Live the People" was packed with venom and vile, its lyrics filled with insults and violent imagery:

> It will not be enough to shoot us
> We swear we will not stop until the snake has lost its head
> [...]
> I'm not here to kiss your ass or to glorify you
> I'm here to bring a bomb

Contrast this with *Lhaqed's* "No More Silence," the controversial rap song described in Chapter 4 and that became an anthem for many February 20th Movement protesters in 2011. Unlike "Long Live the People," which seems to call for the king's removal with the line "God, country, and the third can go away," *Lhaqed*'s song is more anodyne, replacing "king" with "freedom." Elsewhere, "No More Silence" offers pointed critique instead of insults:

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[73] For an excellent treatment of the history of rap and politics in contemporary Morocco, and in particular the challenges of ascribing "resistance" or "co-optation" to particular songs or artists, see Cristina Moreno Almeida's *Rap Beyond Resistance* (2017).

> We want a leader we can hold accountable
>
> Not an infallible, sanctified entity
>
> [...]
>
> Our king is kind and generous to us
>
> But who is he most generous with?
>
> Most of the budget is spent on him and his entourage

The progression from contained, if pointed, criticism in 2011's "No More Silence" to polemic diatribes in 2019's "Love Live the People" mirrors a broader decline in respect for long-standing red lines around the monarchy among ordinary people. Indeed, it's not just the lyrics of popular rap songs or the insults about the king that friends jokingly share online that indicate escalating subversion of legitimation in Morocco. It is also unmistakable in everyday discourse, from the offhand criticisms of the king taxi drivers and shopkeepers relay to their clients, to the gossip and insults friends share in person over tea. All of this would have been "unimaginable" even earlier in Mohammed VI's reign, let alone during the time of Hassan II.[74] One interlocutor described this recent transformation:

> Today, people in their private lives make jokes, they talk, it's no longer [taboo]. But before, when you got in a taxi you stopped talking about the king...you would get in and you would think, 'Is he a cop?' And the driver would think, 'Is he a

[74] *Interview 27*, December 2019.

> cop?' And so if someone talked to you [about the king] you would say, 'I'm sorry I don't really understand this stuff well,' or you would go along with what's said, trying not to reveal your opinion. But now, no. People express their opinions [about the king] in an open way.[75]

Another interlocutor, a veteran journalist and political observer, traced the increased willingness to cross red lines in talking about the king back to 2011. He characterized it as "the culmination of the initial chip in the wall of fear that was the February 20th Movement. This never really stopped and has been continuing on and off again since then."[76]

And as respect for red lines continues to plummet, criticism has sometimes devolved into insult and salacious gossip:

> The criticisms and even insults [have increased] —the talk about whether he has an illness or is gay and things like that. Whether it's true or not I do not know. I'm different, I don't like the insults. But it represents the voice of the people. People reached a level of anger and this is how they express it.[77]

Even in my own everyday interactions with acquaintances and strangers, I was routinely surprised by ordinary people's willingness to openly criticize the king and share unfounded royal rumors: whether it was the interlocutor who casually referred to a high

[75] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[76] *Interview 37*, February 2020.
[77] *Interview 13*, October 2020.

profile friend of the monarch as the "king's boyfriend" and Morocco's "first lady"[78]; the acquaintance who, speaking of the king, told me confidently, "you know that he is sick, right?"[79]; or the taxi driver who complained about authorities bussing in spectators for a recent royal visit, declaring "they only brought them here so people would think everyone loves the king."[80] A figure long walled-off as above reproach was fast becoming a target of criticism and topic of everyday gossip.

This growing phenomenon has also found its reflection in the digital sphere where a growing number of ordinary people take to YouTube, Facebook Live, and other video platforms to not just criticize the king, but to mock him and use his own words against him. For example, around the same time "Long Live the People" was released in October 2019, a popular Moroccan YouTuber was sent to jail after using his platform to criticize the king for never following through with his promises. The YouTuber, known as *Moul Kaskita*, or "the guy with the hat," used his channel to discuss everything from celebrity scandals and gossip to government corruption and global affairs, and his populist, man-of-the-people rhetoric won him a broad following. In the video[81] that ended up being his last, he directed his fire squarely at the king, echoing some of the same criticisms shared by Hirak Rif leader Nasser Zefzafi:

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[78] *Interview 34*, January 2020.
[79] Field Notes, March 2019.
[80] Field Notes, April 2019.
[81] While the original video was removed, along with the rest of *Moul Kaskita*'s account, at the time of his arrest, the video has been reuploaded by others sympathetic to his plight. See here for a version of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D5RoOMJmQo&ab_channel=%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%86%D9%87%D9%86%D8%A7NahnoHonaI

> You give us a speech. And then the political elite and officials get up and start explaining the speech—each person with their own view….But at the end of the day, is there any result in reality? Is there any action from the speeches you deliver? There isn't!

From here, he quickly descends from pointed criticism to insult and mockery, imitating the king reading a speech "that he didn't practice" and stuttering. He then asks bluntly, "What have we gained up to now, from 1999 to the end of 2019, from the day he became king, Mohammed VI? And of course, may God grant him victory!" As he says this last line—an honorific often repeated after saying the king's name—he adjusts his voice dramatically and makes an exaggerated facial expression to make it clear he is mocking the title. Next, his voice now straining as he shouts, *Moul Kaskita* continues dressing down the monarch:

> You can't call us 'your dear people' while I see morning and night my wealth and my livelihood get stolen before my eyes….What am I supposed to say? Long live the king, long live the king! And then I'll be called a citizen? No, I can't! I can't!….you live in stability and luxury while we as citizens live under tyranny and in poverty and marginality. Until when? Until when, all of this?

As he repeats this last line, he takes his sunglasses off and throws them on the table while raising his arms above his head in a sign of indignation. It was a powerful expression of

raw anger and desperation—one that was as compelling as it was unprecedented for its brazenness.

While *Moul Kaskita*'s video, just over fifteen minutes long, was taken down after his arrest for "insulting authorities,"[82] it was shared by other Moroccan YouTubers on their own channels, alongside commentary expressing their solidarity. One such YouTuber, Youssef Moujahid, was himself jailed for reposting an excerpt of the video to his popular channel "We Love You Morocco."[83] But *Moul Kaskita*, whose real name is Mohammed Sekkaki, was not the only Moroccan content creator to challenge the king and call for accountability. Shortly after Sekkaki was arrested, another popular and outspoken online personality, *Moul Hanout*, or "The Shop Owner," was also arrested. Mohammed Ben Boudouh had similarly impugned the king's reputation in his videos, calling him a "thief" who "hates the Moroccan people" and whose speeches were only meant to "fool us."[84]

To be sure, the vast majority of video content produced for Moroccan audiences is apolitical, and the regime is not without its own allies. The hugely popular *ChoufTV*, for example, is routinely used by authorities as a vehicle for disseminating defamatory gossip about outspoken activists and critics of the king. But the broader message relayed by figures like Sekkaki and Ben Boudouh, like the message contained in "Long live the people," resonated with many ordinary Moroccans increasingly willing to blame—and

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[82] For more details on the arrest of *Moul Kaskita*, see the following news report from the English-language news site Morocco World News: https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/12/289849/moul-kaskita-prison-insulting-moroccans/

[83] For more on Moujahid and others' arrests for online speech targeting the king, see here: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/05/morocco-crackdown-social-media-critics

[84] Like with *Moul Kaskita*, *Moul Hanout*'s original videos have also been removed, but they have been reuploaded by others. See here for a version of the video from which the above quotes are taken: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQIMkPwMTL4&ab_channel=peoplevoice%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8

curse—the king for his unfulfilled promises. In this regard, their biting criticism of the king reflected what was already on the lips of many others in the "hidden transcripts" of private discourse.[85] Indeed, as one interlocutor argued, "'Long Live the People' gave us a picture of — never before had anyone said these things publicly. Before it was maybe just said between friends over coffee."[86] One of the rappers himself, known as *Lz3er*, said as much while speaking to journalists after his companion's arrest: "We voiced what the majority of Moroccans feel but fear to say."[87] This makes the subversive messages carried by norm-defying rappers and online personalities all the more threatening to the regime, as another interlocutor and academic explained:

> *Moul Kaskita* and [the rappers] are more dangerous than any political organization in the eyes of the *makhzen* because they speak the language of the people….There are millions of people under the age of 30 who don't have jobs and aren't in school. They are the clients of *Moul Kaskita* and [the rappers].[88]

The messages carried by *Moul Kaskita*, *Moul Hanout,* and the rappers behind "Long Live the People" may not be politically sophisticated, but they appeal especially to the new generation of Moroccans that came of age in the years following the February 20th Movement. This new generation never knew the repression of Hassan II, has

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[85] "Long Live the People" might be read as a "public refusal to reproduce hegemonic appearances" (Scott 1990, 215)—a refusal to contribute to the legitimation of the king as above and apart from politics and ordinary people. As Scott notes, when underground dissent goes public it, "often takes the form of a public breaking of an established ritual of public subordination" (*ibid*), like saying "long live the king!" See discussion in Chapter 2, section 3.
[86] *Interview 51*, April 2020.
[87] https://apnews.com/article/3dd218d6d1824108ab6bdde2d571299f
[88] *Interview I*, February 2020.

heightened expectations for the future, and is better-educated and more interconnected than previous generations. But faced with bleak employment prospects, declining standards of living, and decreased freedoms, they are lashing out—and often at the king. As one interlocutor explained:

> This generation grew up in uprisings, in protests, [and with] demands. In many of the movements and in the marches, they don't get scared. They scream something at the police and don't get scared, or something about Mohammed VI, and don't get scared. If you see how people today address the king, it's not like 2007 or even like 2011. Insults are now normal.[89]

Another interlocutor, a young activist who came of age after the February 20th Movement, noted how among his hyper-connected peers, "if you want laughs, make a meme about the king. He's the person whose image has been distorted the most, who is laughed at the most now."[90] People comb over Mohammed VI's speeches, he explained, "just so they can pick out some mistake" and make light of it.

Led by outspoken rappers, online personalities, and a bold new generation with little left to lose, ordinary Moroccans are increasingly disregarding the discursive red lines that have long marked the king as off-limits for criticism. After years of royal promises and stalled reforms, they are impatient and want accountability from their leader. This heightened frustration was captured in a 2019 poll which found that nearly half of all Moroccans wanted "rapid political change"—by far the highest rate in the

[89] *Interview 13*, October 2020.
[90] *Interview 22*, November 2019.

MENA region.[91] Such change is unlikely to come, however. "The regime has nothing left to give," short of legitimate reform, one academic observed.[92] Meanwhile, "Moroccans have for the first time come to see the king as creating problems rather than protecting the country," as a long-time human rights defender explained.[93] The result is a highly volatile situation for the monarchy. "Mohammed VI's goodwill is gone."[94] No longer seen as the "king of the poor" who sits above the fray of politics and self-interest, he now presides over a kingdom whose citizens are losing their faith in the monarchy's very *raison d'être*.

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The increased willingness of many Moroccans to cross red lines and criticize the king should not be mistaken for an increased tolerance of such speech on the part of authorities. Nasser Zefzafi was, after all, given a heavy prison sentence, along with other Hirak Rif leaders. The rappers behind "Long Live the People" have faced prison and intimidation. *Moul Kaskita* and *Moul Hanout*, along with dozens of other ordinary Moroccans who have posted critical speech of the king online, have also paid the price. Meanwhile, dissenting voices in journalism, civil society, and academia are relentlessly surveilled, defamed, and arrested on dubious charges. Faced with escalating criticism and without recourse to legitimation or co-optation, the Moroccan regime has responded with the only tool it has remaining: repression. "The Moroccan regime doesn't have any ideas,

[91] The second highest rate came from Yemen, where 41% of respondents indicated a desire for rapid political change. For more on the survey, see here: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48771758
[92] *Interview K*, February 2020.
[93] *Interview 33*, January 2020.
[94] *Interview 37*, February 2020.

any solutions to the social crisis," one activist and independent journalist remarked; "it only has the security solution."[95] Another interlocutor concurred, explaining that Morocco was now "headed in a direction that is more authoritarian, since this is the only answer the regime has to give."[96] Since being forced to pivot back toward greater incorporation and tolerance in 2011 with the February 20th Movement, the Moroccan regime had been "little by little" ratcheting up repression.[97] But when Hirak Rif emerged, repression escalated sharply and has remained elevated ever since, as one former journalist and daughter of an activist family explained:

> Hirak Rif was a point of transformation in Morocco after February 20th, from the dream that we might have reforms and a new constitution that respects rights and freedoms, even if just on paper, to a Morocco controlled by the grip of security and the return of the security approach, which was relatively hidden after February 20th.[98]

While the intensity of repression does not yet match the "Years of Lead" when torture and forced disappearances were widespread, leading human rights organizations in the kingdom nonetheless report higher levels of political detention today than any time since.[99]

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[95] *Interview 19*, October 2019.
[96] *Interview 47*, March 2020.
[97] *Interview 23*, November 2020.
[98] *Interview 50*, March 2020.
[99] Field Notes, January 2020.

Repression may very well succeed in quelling dissent and restoring order, at least in the short term. “They are rebuilding the wall of fear that fell [in 2011],” one dispirited activist and former journalist confessed.[100] But such a strategy is not without risk. With the king increasingly regarded as a political player and blamed for stalled reforms, increased repression only further “kills trust and provokes brazenness,” one moderate human rights advocate argued.[101] And for many, the threat of repression alone will not be sufficient to deter them from crossing red lines:

> The reason for the boldness is not courage. It is pain. When someone is really in pain, they no longer see red lines. They only want to tell people, ‘I am oppressed.’ Everybody has come to understand that political decisions are made by the king, not the government. So now people have started to say, ‘Why don’t we confront the party that actually is in charge, which is the king?’[102]

Until the conditions that contribute to increased criticism of the king are addressed—until the source of the pain is treated—the king is likely to remain in the crosshairs of many frustrated and desperate Moroccans, even as repression rises.

[100] *Interview 46*, March 2020.
[101] *Interview 40*, February 2020.
[102] *Interview 52*, April 2020.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Until recently, the vast literature on comparative authoritarianism in political science had largely ignored the importance of legitimation and the broader symbolic aspects of politics in authoritarian states. The work that did exist, with some exceptions (e.g. Wedeen 1999), largely explained authoritarian legitimation by invoking static notions of culture and tradition. Today, however, scholars increasingly recognize that authoritarian leaders do more than repress dissent and co-opt opponents to maintain power. They craft cults of personality, cast themselves as champions of development and progress, and project images of military prowess to get buy-in from ordinary people and "legitimate" their rule. But can the legitimating images autocrats project ever backfire? Are their justifications for rule ever anything more than simply cheap talk? And what are the tradeoffs between legitimation, co-optation, and repression?

Leveraging extensive documentary and interview evidence from contemporary Morocco, I have sought to begin addressing these unanswered questions in this manuscript. The findings I have presented upend the conventional wisdom about authoritarian strategies of rule. Rather than bolstering stability, I have shown that the co-optation of prominent opposition forces in Morocco has over time undercut the monarchy's image as an apolitical arbiter, leading to unprecedented direct criticism of the king and calls for accountability from the very top. In response, the regime has stepped up repression, sullying the kingdom's reputation for relative tolerance and dashing the hopes of international policymakers who had hoped reforms launched in response to the

Arab Spring might help jumpstart democratization. This project thus speaks directly to key questions about accountability and governance in Morocco, which is representative of a significant subset of semi-liberalized authoritarian regimes that often rely on legitimation and co-optation to economize on repression and protect their international reputation.

Theoretically and conceptually, this project makes two major contributions to the literature on authoritarianism. First, I have shown that the strategies authoritarian elites devise to quell dissent and survive can break down endogenously over time—and thus not only due to exogenous shocks as often assumed (e.g. Geddes 1999, Brancati 2014). Specifically, I demonstrated that the sidelining of opposition via co-optation can provide an opening for dissent and protest when it weakens legitimation, compelling elites to increase repression. While these conclusions are directly applicable to other monarchies like Jordan where leaders style themselves as neutral referees of their kingdom's political systems, the dissertation tackles bigger questions about how autocrats balance among survival strategies relevant to scholars of authoritarianism, democratization, and protest everywhere.

Second, by theorizing legitimation claims as public standards of performance, which impose obligations on leaders and against which ordinary citizens judge their behavior, I have developed a framework that can be transported to other contexts. This framework might be applied most readily to other semi-liberalized autocracies where leaders invest in their self-presentation to legitimate their rule—though not necessarily in the same terms as the Moroccan monarchy. While such legitimating images can help leaders economize on repression and gain popular support, they also create vulnerabilities

when ordinary people perceive that incumbents are not living up to their word. The framework I have developed helps explain the logic behind this while also showing why public criticism of authoritarian leaders rooted in their own justifications for rule may be especially impactful.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, my dissertation also contributes to the historiography of the 2011 MENA uprisings by showing the long-term consequences of the protests in an often-overlooked case. Scholars and international policymakers initially hailed Morocco as an exception, crediting the king's swift promises of reform and efforts to co-opt opponents with demobilizing protesters (e.g. Buehler 2015). Yet instead of inaugurating meaningful change, Mohammed VI used limited reforms in 2011 to bide time and curry international favor—something the regime's recent turn toward repression only underscores. Moreover, and put into broader a broader historical context, it is now clear that the monarchy's renewed promises and co-optation efforts following the protests raised expectations and further hollowed out the ranks of Morocco's independent political actors. The political vacuum that resulted strained the king's image as an apolitical arbiter, leading to a rise in direct criticism from ordinary people seeking accountability and increasingly willing to blame the king for stalled reforms and other governance failures. In other words, while co-optation and superficial liberalization helped demobilize protesters in 2011, they set the king up for direct confrontation with ordinary people in the years that followed when reality failed to match lofty royal rhetoric. In this way, this project has demonstrated the virtue of taking the long view when it comes to analyzing the impact of social movements and protest. Too often, the rush to "code" cases as successes or failures obscures the broader political changes in

state-society relations protest movements like the "Arab Spring" can catalyze. Indeed, many of the long-term impacts of the 2011 protests are only now coming into view—especially in Morocco.[103]

In addition to speaking to questions about the long-run impact of the 2011 uprisings, this project also contributes to the historiography of an important phase in contemporary Moroccan politics. While there are myriad accounts of the *alternance* period, the Buehler February 20th Movement, and the post-2011 reforms, this project brings them all together into one cohesive narrative that analyzes the emergence and breakdown of the regime's contemporary legitimation strategy. This analysis shows how the incorporation of the *koutla* in 1997 and the PJD in 2011 fit into a broader pattern protest and dissent, followed by co-optation and concessions—and how this process reached a dead-end with the emergence of Hirak Rif in 2017 and the subsequent rise in unprecedented criticism of the monarchy. In other words, this project examines the contemporary Moroccan monarchy's entire experiment with co-optation and superficial liberalization, beginning in the late 1970s under Hassan II, and arguably ending with the sharp rise in repression following Hirak Rif.

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While this project has prioritized internal validity and theory-building, the arguments I have developed might be applied directly to other monarchies that have ostensibly relinquished some of their executive authority, and where similar justificatory claims about the monarch as an apolitical arbiter are key, such as in Jordan. While the specific contours of the discursive struggle over the monarchy's legitimation claims in

[103] For more on this theme, see Snyder, "Moroccan Political Activism and the Virtues of Taking the Long View," *Jadaliyya*. October 2018. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38095.

Jordan differ from those in Morocco, the broader logic of the framework I develop here nonetheless offers analytic purchase for scholars of the kingdom. Indeed, recent developments in Jordan suggest there may be significant parallels with the Moroccan case. Like in Morocco, *lèse-majesté* is a punishable offense in Jordan. Nonetheless, direct criticism of King Abdullah II has increased markedly in recent years, especially from Jordanians of East Bank descent who make up the monarchy's core base of support. As Schwedler argues in her recent monograph on protest and dissent in contemporary Jordan, many feel the king has failed to "honor the social contract" between the monarchy and East Bank Jordanians established in the 1920s (2022, 2). Like in Morocco, protesters have also sought to use the king's own promises and words against him, and have also taken to subverting the language of legitimation—shouting at a protest in 2019, for example, that "We have stopped saying 'long live you,' why should you live and we die?" (22). To be sure, there are few signs that protesters want the downfall of the Hashemite monarchy or that the regime is in any danger of collapse. But like in Morocco, repression has increased sharply in Jordan in recent years, partially in response to such protests.

Beyond Jordan, the core arguments I advance in this project might also offer some insight into recent developments in Thailand. The Thai monarchy has faced a rising tide of anti-royalism ever since it lent its support to a 2006 military coup that ousted the kingdom's democratically-elected government. Research by scholars like Phuaphansawat suggests that anti-royalism in Thailand is rooted in part in a sense of disillusionment with the monarchy over its failure to live up to its professed political neutrality (2018, 370-373). Since 1932, Thailand has been a constitutional monarchy, yet recent political

interventions by the king—including backing successive military coups in 2006 and 2014—have exposed the "contradictions of royalist ideology" and triggered an unprecedented uptick in direct criticism of the king (366). Yet similar to in Morocco, protesters at first sought to appeal to royal ideology, launching "friendly" critiques that called on the king to honor his word or other oblique criticism that shied away from directly crossed red lines. In recent years, however, criticism has grown more brazen and direct, opening up new—and unprecedented—avenues of dissent in the kingdom.[104]

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As a project focused on legitimation and dissent in authoritarian regimes, there are several normative implications associated with the arguments I have advanced. I will conclude this manuscript by highlighting two of the most important. First, this project highlights the unintended consequences of insincere liberalization and co-optation without political reforms for authoritarian regimes. When autocrats initiate processes of liberalization and incorporation like what we have witnessed in Morocco over the past two decades, few actually intend to meaningfully relinquish power. Instead, such processes are meant to serve as a safety valve—satisfying popular demands for representation while saddling figures other than the leader with the blame for governance failures. Yet as I have demonstrated, without meaningful reforms, these processes can only act as a safety valve for so long: over time, ordinary people begin to see the entire system as a sham, stop participating, and direct their blame toward the leader, not the elected (and useless) politicians. One tempting conclusion from this might be that

[104] See Phuaphansawat, "The Anti-Royalist Possibility: Thailand's 2020 Student Movement," *Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, October 2020. https://fulcrum.sg/the-anti-royalist-possibility-thailands-2020-student-movement/.

autocrats ought to simply co-opt opponents and liberalize more slowly. But I would like to offer a more positive, though equally plausible, conclusion: if autocrats want to incorporate their opponents and liberalize their regimes, they should do so sincerely and take solace in the fact that, in exchange for giving up some power, they might be able to protect their image and legacy in the long-run.

Such a prospect ought to be especially appealing to monarchs like Mohammed VI, whose family has ruled over Morocco since the 16th century. Moreover, there are myriad historical precedents for absolute monarchs relinquishing power to democratic forces and, in the process, safeguarding the longevity and legacy of their dynasty. Such pacted transitions offer a viable path for the monarchy and may well be in the best interests of the monarchy and ordinary Moroccans alike.

The second major implication of this project, and the one with which I will conclude, relates to the importance of attending to quotidian politics and ordinary people in political science research about authoritarianism. Though no longer exclusively the case, much of the early literature on authoritarianism focused on elites and formal institutions, often to the neglect of the masses and their impact on authoritarian politics. To be sure, elites and the institutions they populate are key to understanding much about how power and resources are distributed under authoritarianism and why some regimes endure longer than others. But in the spirit of Jim Scott, and expanding on his work on the legitimation of relations of domination, this study has shown that the perceptions and voices of ordinary people also matter—and can meaningfully impact elite politics. The images autocrats project and claims they advance are more than simply cheap talk: they

can endow they also endow opponents and ordinary people with powerful discursive tools for countering perceived regime excesses and holding autocrats to their word.

Thus as interest returns to legitimation and the practices autocrats engage in beyond co-optation and repression, the Moroccan case demonstrates that the images leaders try to cultivate for themselves and the promises they make are not always cost-free. They also create vulnerabilities and resources for ordinary people when given the opportunity to exploit them. By repeatedly promising reforms, and further entrenching the monarchy's image as an apolitical arbiter above the fray of everyday politics, Mohammed VI made it easier for figures like Nzasser Zafzafi and Moul Kaskita to use his own words and image against him. This serves as a helpful reminder that the strategies authoritarian elites craft to maintain power can sometimes be constrained by the perceptions and behaviors of ordinary people.

But ordinary people, of course, are not the only constituencies that matter in authoritarian regimes. The monarchy can still count on the support of the military and security establishment, and most of the kingdom's business elite as well. Thus I have not argued that the wave of unprecedented norm defiance in Morocco will inevitably lead to the monarchy's collapse—and indeed, the regime has dramatically escalated repression to contain this rising dissent. But the declining efficacy of co-optation and legitimation, and the subsequent increase in repression, nonetheless carry risks for the regime as it tries its best to readjust its strategies. Declining compliance with norms and growing criticism of the king himself, for example, make certain things — like large-scale, anti-monarchy protests — more possible than they were before at the outset of Mohammed VI's reign or in 2011 during the MENA uprisings, even if they nonetheless remain unlikely. Paying

attention to the voices and perceptions of ordinary people helps sensitize us to these changing possibilities—while also contributing to a richer, and more accurate, picture of life under authoritarianism.

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