

More than repression. The significance of *divide et impera* in the Middle East and North Africa. The case of Morocco.

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Introduction

The majority of studies on the Middle East and North Africa concentrate on the factors that explain the absence and failure of processes of democratisation through variables that apply across the different countries rather than examining the nature of regime change in the region (Karatnycky, 2002). This is problematic because it tends to overlook the more relevant question of how all these regimes are able to survive and bypass the third wave of democratisation. Explanations based on *rentierism* (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987) cannot account for the politics of authoritarianism in oil-free countries

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such as Morocco and Tunisia. Also, the support of the international community for Arab dictators (Ghalioun, 2004) cannot explain the survival of authoritarianism in states such as Syria and Iran. Finally, explanations based on Islam and Arab political culture (Lewis, 2002) have proven very weak when tested (Stepan and Robertson, 2003).

Thus, for an explanation that might be more satisfactory and applicable in a comparative context, scholars have begun to analyse in more detail the strategies and instruments of survival that incumbent authoritarian regimes have put in place (Brownlee 2002a, 2002b). By far the most popular variable used to explain the 'endurance' of authoritarian rule in the region has been the strength of the 'coercive apparatus' available to the incumbents. Eva Bellin (2004, p. 140) suggests for example that 'the solution to the puzzle of Middle Eastern and North African exceptionalism lies [...] in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism, specifically a robust coercive apparatus in these states.' The ability of the ruling elites to set up a security apparatus that is both reliable and effective is due to a number of domestic and international factors ranging from fiscal health to external support. There are significant policy repercussions that stem from this analysis. In particular, the democratising strategies of international actors are unable to take into account the complex web of complicities that incumbents have put in place to gain domestic legitimacy, leading, as the Iraqi case demonstrates, to facile assumptions about regime change once the repressive actor is taken out of the equation.

While there is very little doubt that the robustness of the coercive apparatus is a significant factor in the persistence of authoritarianism, this explanation suffers from a number of theoretical and practical shortcomings. This paper, building on the work of Dawisha and Zartman (1988) and Lust-Okar (2004) attempts to address these

shortcomings by focusing on a specific aspect of these regimes' survival: the ability to 'divide and conquer' the opposition by pitting opposition movements against each other without resorting to coercion. Rather, co-optation of and selective rewards for sectors of the opposition have been and still are frequently utilised to consolidate authoritarian rule and fend off demands for democratic reforms. The contention of this study is that coercion alone cannot explain the endurance of authoritarianism and that regime survival depends to a significant degree on effective legitimacy. As argued by Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004): 'blunt repression alone [cannot] account for the fact that no single Arab democracy has developed when all other world regions experienced democratic transitions.' Within this context, the strategy of *divide et impera* does not solely apply to established political opposition (i.e. political parties), but has also invested the sphere of civil society (Albrecht, 2005; Sardamov, 2005; and Carapico, 2002). This has led some to question the theoretical validity of civil society as a pre-requisite for democratisation (Berman, 2003) and the policy-making effectiveness of funding civil society activism to provoke democratisation (Hawthorne, 2004). This paper explores the validity of the assumption that the same strategy applied in the past to neutralise the potential opposition of political parties is being utilised today with respect to civil society actors with the same degree of effectiveness and it contributes to strengthen the case for a better understanding of how authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa operate to guarantee their survival. This is an important aspect of politics in the region and an understanding of how civil society activism can be hijacked by the regime provides interesting lessons for both academics and policy-makers involved in the promotion of such activism as the way to democracy. The regime and all the different opposition actors

struggle to control the space civil society provides and the novelty of this analysis resides in the teasing out of how this struggle is occurring in the Moroccan context.

This study concentrates on the case of Morocco because the country has belonged almost since independence to the category of 'liberalised autocracies' (Brumberg, 2003), where the ruler has been consistently able to divide the opposition and pit some movements against others in order to retain full control over the political system by formally subscribing to some form of political pluralism. In addition, Morocco has witnessed a massive surge in the number of civil society actors and an impressive growth of civic activism since Mohammed VI came to power, which, in theory, should bode well for the democratisation of the country (Vermeren, 2004).

Single case studies inevitably suffer from inherent weaknesses when it comes to generalise the findings, particularly because Morocco may simply represent one type of authoritarianism. However, the explanatory power of the argument is still present due to the broad similarities that many countries in the region share in terms of civil society growth, strength of Islamism, perceived rulers' illegitimacy and degree of economic and social problems.

The endurance of authoritarianism: beyond coercion

As mentioned in the previous section, drawing from insights on studies of revolution, Eva Bellin (2004, p. 139) gives a rather powerful and quite convincing explanation for the robustness of authoritarianism in the region. She argues that 'authoritarianism has proven exceptionally robust in the Middle East and North Africa

because the coercive apparatus in many states has been exceptionally able and willing to crush reform initiatives from below.’ Her study details the variables which have an impact on such robustness and she finds that in the Middle East and North Africa all the conditions are present that make authoritarianism both viable and effective in impeding democratic change. Bellin’s contribution is particularly useful for two reasons. First of all, it shifts the attention away from what is considered the main opposition force in most countries: Islamist movements. There has in fact been a very strong tendency to concentrate on such movements and their ideology/actions to explain why the region has not yet gone through a process of democratisation. Thus, much work is produced attempting to figure out whether Islamist movements and parties can be considered democratic actors or anti-democratic ones and what the implications of such findings are. This has generated an endless and ultimately fruitless debate because it is quite difficult to *a priori* label any political movement as ‘democratic’ or ‘anti-democratic’ without an examination of the surrounding political and institutional arena. Brumberg (2002, p. 111) convincingly argues that ‘the challenge is not to figure out whether Islamism is “essentially” democratic versus autocratic [...]. Instead, it is to see whether this or that Islamist group is acting within an hegemonic political arena [...] or else within a competitive [...] arena.’ Bellin’s work thus has the merit of re-focusing attention on the authoritarian state, its resources and its means to secure its survival.

Secondly, Bellin’s work highlights the very important issue of political violence as a means for current ruling elites to remain in power. This aspect is only rarely underlined, partly because this type of violence is less spectacular than what Islamist terrorists are associated with and partly because the perpetrators of state coercion quite

often share a 'convergence of [...] interests with Western strategies' (Ghalioun 2004, p. 128). The focus on violence and the use of coercive means contributes to better explain how opposition movements operate in such an environment.

Bellin (2002) has elsewhere given a more nuanced account of what she calls the coercive apparatus encompassing for instance the use of arbitrary legal procedures to silence opposition figures, but the focus is still on the latent threat of violence from the regime to enforce its will. Such a focus suffers nonetheless from a number of shortcomings and if we want to fully understand what explains the persistence and the efficacy of authoritarian rule we need to address them. The first problem is the methodological over-reliance on a single variable. Thus, the importance of the coercive ability of the state and the extensive penetration of the security services in Middle Eastern societies should not be overestimated. While it is true, as Bellin points out, that these states spend substantial amounts of money to build up their security apparatus and that they exercise varying degrees of repression in order to counter domestic demands for reform, this cannot account for survival on its own. All authoritarian states need some legitimacy on the part of some sectors of society if they want to last, as pure coercion does not seem to be effective over a long period of time. According to Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004, p. 373), 'the search for some form of legitimacy must be at the core of every regime-survival strategy in non-democratic societies.'

The second problem with the explanation that Bellin presents is the lack of evidence demonstrating how this coercive apparatus works and operates so efficiently within society. By simply arguing that it is robust and efficient, we have the impression that we are dealing with societies where there is a high degree of continuous violence.

While this has been the case in Algeria since the cancellation of legislative elections in January 1992, this is the exception rather than the rule and other countries in the region have at most only gone through sporadic periods of low-intensity conflict (for instance Syria in the early 1980s and Egypt in the early 1980s and mid 1990s) or have known very little widespread violence (such as Jordan or Morocco). Thus, the main characteristics of the coercive apparatus seem to be harassment and punishment of individuals or small groups of opposition militants rather than the absolute control exercised by the security forces. The existence of an active civil society is for instance an indicator of the presence of an autonomous space where ordinary people can structure their interactions free from state's interference (Cavatorta, 2006).

Thirdly, Bellin's coercive apparatus seems to function because there is a very low level of political mobilisation in most of the MENA region and this gives the impression that we are dealing with very static and apathetic societies. This may not actually be the case, as civil society activism demonstrates (Norton, 1996). This energy for change may not be transmitted through traditional channels such as political parties and openly political associations, but this specific case of low-level mobilisation does not mean that other avenues to express opposition do not exist. For instance, political mobilisation can take the form of improving one's behaviour to become a better Muslim (for members of very active Islamist associations) or through active community work with the objective of educating citizens or providing basic social services.

Finally, there seems to be a failure on Bellin's part to conceive of coercion only as the method of last resort for ensuring the continuation of authoritarian rule. The use of physical violence and widespread intimidation are appropriate responses only when the

very survival of the regime is threatened to the core, as it was in Algeria in 1991, and might not be the most rational response at all times. This is increasingly true in the current international environment, where, despite a significant convergence of interests between most rulers in the region and Western countries, large scale human rights abuses, widespread violence and coercion are likely to have a very high international cost for the perpetrators in terms of international legitimacy.

Given these shortcomings, it is possible to see coercion as only part of the explanation for the persistence of authoritarianism. Such coercion is certainly present and functions as a very powerful threat for those who attempt to challenge the system, but it is possible to conceive of other strategies that authoritarian rulers employ to remain in power without resorting to coercive means. Thus, the strategy of co-optation and division of opponents to better control it should be analysed. The phenomenon of co-optation might actually be just as important as the use of coercion because it allows ruling elites to expand the base of their legitimacy while pre-empting true demands for reform. Political opponents, be they individuals or political parties, do not need to immediately be coerced into accepting the rules of the game, but can be cajoled into accepting positions of responsibility or can be given 'legislative' rewards on policies that they care about without undermining the system itself. There might in fact be a substantial degree of what might be termed 'voluntary co-optation' whereby groups and individuals are happy to be associated with the regime because such an association allows them to pursue their primary objectives. In this context co-optation becomes easier for the regime because there is a market for it. In the absence of strong political parties with an overarching

project for reforming society, such a co-optation is much easier because, usually, civil society actors are driven by one-issue concerns.

It follows that what is true for political parties and individuals can also be true for other sectors of society, be they social classes or ethnic groups or religious minorities. Co-optation does not obviously equate with power sharing and it does not challenge the fundamentals of the political order because the real wielders of power remain in full control of the political agenda and of the state institutions. Successful co-optation relies on a number of inducements that can be activated to obtain the desired result ranging from privileges of an economic nature to ones of a legal nature to ones of a personal nature. For example, the literature on the *rentier state* explains quite convincingly how ruling elites use external rents, where available, to buy off certain sectors of society by setting up a system of crony capitalism which makes members of the business elites, traditionally seen as a pro-democratisation class, a pillar of the authoritarian regime (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987).

Given the considerable economic and social problems that most of the Arab world experiences and given the extent to which current regimes are under pressure to reform, the co-optation variable explains better than the coercion variable why such societies are not in constant violent turmoil.

There is in fact a very long history of co-optation in the region, whereby certain sectors of society are awarded privileges in exchange for support or at least tacit assent to authoritarian rule. This stems from the fact that, far from being the unitary societies they purport to be, Arab states are not harmonious and are characterised by cross-cutting linguistic, ethnic, religious and class cleavages (Sadiki, 2002). In such a context, it is

possible for authoritarian rulers to utilise these cleavages in such a fashion as to make co-optation the primary strategy. It follows that for co-optation to function, a degree of 'coercion' is certainly required, but repression is not the primary method for strengthening one's authoritarian position: positive inducements and rewards can be just as effective. In addition, a degree of voluntary co-optation certainly exists.

One very important aspect that needs further analysis is the role that the method of *divide et impera* plays within the larger mechanism of co-optation. Rulers in the MENA region have often experienced a rather high degree of opposition from different quarters since the major crises of legitimacy that began towards the end of the 1960s. At that time, and throughout the 1970s, the challenge coming from the revolutionary Marxist left was not simply defeated through massive repression, but was countered as well by letting the other major opposition movement (the Islamists) have more freedom of action and rewarding them with legislative changes that fit their agenda, as the conservative revision of the Family Code in Algeria in the mid 1980s shows. Given the very deep ideological antipathy that existed between Marxists and Islamists, a very powerful rivalry developed between the two movements, allowing the authoritarian ruler to exploit such divisions to consolidate his power by playing the *super-partes* arbiter. In Egypt, Sadat 'attempted to win the support of religious groups by lightening up restrictions on their political activity' (Al Zayyat 2004, p. xvii) in order to counter the leftist challenge to his economic and international policies.

This manipulative tradition has successfully worked in more recent times in reverse, where secular and leftist groups have quite willingly tended to gravitate around the authoritarian leaders for fear of Islamism. This has permitted the ruling elites to

survive almost unscathed the third wave of democratisation. Given that the Islamists have played the role of most significant opposition in the vast majority of the countries in the region over the last three decades, it has been quite easy for current rulers to rely on the strategy of *divide et impera*. Islamists movements and parties are feared not only by incumbents, but by other sectors of society as well, leading them to accept what is seen as the lesser of two evils: the incumbent. This is not only true for leftist and secular parties, but also for religious minorities (the Christians of Syria and Egypt) or for ethnic ones (the Kabyles of Algeria). What is worrisome for the spread of democracy in the region is that a large number of pro-democracy movements and pro-democracy intellectuals have been 'scared into' embracing a police state in order not to face the possibility of an Islamist electoral victory. The willingness to be co-opted and to lend some sort of 'reserved' legitimacy to the incumbents has not been the product of coercion, rather of perceived irreconcilable ideological differences with Islamist parties. The primary objective of resisting the expansion of Islamism leads to voluntary co-optation, as the telling case of the Algerian feminist Khalida Messaoudi demonstrates. The ability of incumbents to exploit the Islamist card has permitted them to present themselves as the saviours of democracy precisely because nationally and internationally respected figures and political movements endorsed their rule as the price to pay to keep the '*fachoislamistes*' out of power. Brumberg (2003, p. 111) convincingly argues that 'in the Middle East [...] fear of Islamist victories has produced "autocracy with democrats", as key groups that might choose democracy, absent an Islamist threat, now actively support or at least tolerate autocrats.' The support given by numerous pro-democracy secular liberal intellectuals

and movements to the Algerian military for cancelling the 1992 elections through a military coup in order to avoid an Islamist victory is paradigmatic in this respect.

What has worked at the domestic level has also worked well on the international stage, where authoritarian incumbents have benefited from Western support partly because they keep presenting themselves as the only alternative to the ‘uncivil forces’ of Islamism. Thus, Zakaria (2004, p. 2) can argue that ‘the Arab rulers of the Middle East are autocratic, corrupt, and heavy-handed. But they are still more liberal, tolerant, and pluralistic than those who would likely replace them.’

It therefore transpires that coercion is not the only explanatory variable that accounts for the persistence of authoritarianism in the MENA region. Incumbents have traditionally used a strategy of co-optation based on dividing and ruling the different opposition movements that challenged them. They performed this task over a number of decades and have been able to defeat the most important challenger of the time and remain in power. The reliance on such a strategy has paid off quite handsomely, as co-optation has never gone beyond what it is: a method to exclude significant political change in the long-term. The nature of the different regimes has changed over time because the incumbents shifted their base of support throughout the decades, but the real wielders of power have not truly relinquished it to any of the actors co-opted over time. In this process, the real losers have been democratic procedures. Thus, ‘the resulting alliance between potential democrats and police states offers an inverted image of political reforms in Eastern Europe and the wider Third World’ (Brumberg 2003, p. 111), hindering the development of democracy in the MENA region. It is not surprising that

today political parties in the Arab world are considered to be, at best, irrelevant and impotent.

The Moroccan Makhzen

There is very little doubt that Morocco remains an authoritarian state and, in a recent interview, Moroccan constitutionalist Omar Bendorou (*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* April 2005, p. 28) confirmed that in light of the present constitution ‘all power is really in the hands of the King,’¹ who is of course unelected. In spite of this, Morocco has always given the impression of embracing political pluralism. This means that the ruler permits some sort of political opposition, while retaining the last word on the most important issues affecting the country (Leveau, 1997). Thus, Morocco holds regular elections where competing parties are allowed to win seats in parliament, although the elected assembly does not have any substantial power. In addition, elections results are predetermined and they are designed to favour political parties that are either loyal or, at the very least, not hostile to the King (Morocco seems to have translated the concept of ‘loyal opposition’ into practice). This means that the government that is expression of such parties has very little room to manoeuvre because the King, according to the Constitution, has the power to appoint the most important ministers and chairs cabinet meetings (Willis 1999). His role and his position cannot be challenged also because the sovereign enjoys religious legitimacy as Commander of the faithful (*imarat al mouminine*), claiming to be a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed (Zeghal, 2005).

Thus, Morocco has been, since its independence, a paradigmatic neo-patrimonial state where the King has been able to become the ultimate arbiter of decision-making by

utilising a mixture of coercion and co-optation. In fact, the emphasis on coercion as the primary instrument to remain in power does not fully explain the persistence of authoritarianism in the country. This does not mean that coercion has not been employed at times in a rather extensive manner to subdue recalcitrant opposition. Under Hassan II's reign, political opponents were physically eliminated, others languished in prison and social repression of dissent was widespread. Thus, a very heavy atmosphere characterised periods of post-independence political life in Morocco (Perrault 1990) and the country has been for a long time 'an authoritarian state that kept people in line by intimidation and abuse' (Howe 2001, p. 59).

However, this was not the only method that Hassan II employed to consolidate his power. He was to give the impression of political pluralism precisely because over time he co-opted large sectors of the opposition, particularly political parties; a strategy already used by his predecessor Mohammed V. As Holden (2005, p. 23) argues, 'beyond the formal system, power ha[s] been exercised by the *Makhzen* (ruling elite centred around the throne) through patronage.' The true role of political parties in the Maghreb has been explained by Willis (2002, p. 4): 'rather than controlling the state, they themselves are controlled by the state.' In the case of Morocco there is much evidence to support the hypothesis that political parties function simply as providers of legitimacy for the incumbents and as avenues of control of popular attitudes. Since independence, the ruling sovereign has practised a strategy of '*divide et impera*' by, for instance, 'sponsoring the creation of a new party with the intention of undermining support for an existing political party' (Willis 2002, p. 4) perceived to be a threat. In addition, referring to the other North African states as well, Willis (2002, p. 4) argues that 'regimes interfere

in the internal affairs of individual parties by playing on existing divisions within them sponsoring rifts and splits' and guarantee important and well paid posts to opposition figures prising them away from the ranks of political parties.

This strategy has been a constant of the Moroccan political system. For example, much like in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the radical Marxist left posed a serious challenge to the throne in the 1960s and 1970s. The Socialist party and its leaders, the students' movements and sectors of the trade unions seriously contested the rule Hassan II exercised and posed a serious threat to the regime, but, through a mix of coercion and *divide et impera*, Hassan was able to contain the challenge. As part of the strategy of dividing the opposition, the King encouraged for instance the growth of Islamism to counter the growth of Marxism. Through his religious legitimacy, he permitted greater scope of action and political involvement to Islamist associations such as the *Al Islah Wa Attajdid* because it would contest the political space to the left. In the words of a former political prisoner, 'Islamism has grown considerably in Morocco, and this is also because it was encouraged to do so by King Hassan II to challenge the rise of the Marxist left. This had led to confrontations, for instance in schools, among Islamists and leftists' (interview with author, 2005). In this respect, Hassan II was able to put himself above these disputes and become the sole arbiter in a situation of social conflict. Again, a former dissident confirms: 'the King cannot be above the parties, he has to be the ultimate arbiter [of their disputes]. This is how Hassan conceived of his role' (interview with author, 2005). In a sense, permitting a degree of pluralism and therefore a confrontation of policies and ideas allows the Monarchy to be the ultimate decision-maker because the different parties are unable to reach a compromise on a number of

issues due to their lack of control on the levers of power. The strategy paid off and was utilised again when the domestic threat changed from the Marxist left to political Islam.

Contrary to the expectations of some (Munson 1991), Islamism had become by the early 1990s the most significant ideological opposition to the King and it still represents its most significant challenge today. In particular, the *Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan* led by Sheikh Yassine is very vocal in its opposition to the authoritarianism of the monarchy.² Thus, in order to counter the Islamist threat, coercion was certainly used by Hassan II, as the imprisonment of Sheikh Yassine in the early 1970s demonstrates, but co-optation was also employed later on. In particular, the King in 1997 used the fear of the Islamist ideological and political project to entice the Socialist party into accepting what seemed an innovative political compromise: *l' alternance*, whereby the King promised that the Socialist party's leader would become the Prime Minister and have the opportunity to lead the country's government following free and fair elections.

This seemed to launch a democratising era in Morocco's political life, although the King maintained strict control over the most important departments and policies, leading to the powerlessness of the government and reinforcing the royal palace. Thus, the choice of the Socialist party to participate backfired on the party itself, as its experience in power discredited it even further with the electorate. At the same time, the King permitted the participation in the political system of a moderate Islamist formation, the PJD, with 'the expectation that it [would] undermine and attract support away from' (Willis 2002) the *Jamiat*. In turn, the *Jamiat* is quite critical of the PJD's decision to participate in what it sees as a 'worthless rigged game' (interview with the author, 2005).

From this emerges a much more complex picture than the one painted by those who argue that blunt coercion is the glue that keeps the political system together.

Morocco is a significant example of the mixed strategies incumbents utilise to remain in power and highlights how processes of supposed democratisation are under the strict control of the wielders of power.

King Hassan's death and the access to the throne of his son Mohammed VI in July 1999 seemed to usher in a new era of democratic reforms that would further liberalise society and the political system. There is no doubt that Mohammed VI has made a considerable amount of changes over the last few years and that Morocco has become a far less repressive country. The new King initiated 'a dynamic of change' (*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* September 2005, p. 97) and while his liberalising record is, according to some (Vermeren 2005), mixed, a recent special issue of the magazine *Telquel* highlighted 100 reasons for Moroccans to be optimistic about their future. In the analysis of where Morocco stands today, the editors emphasised eighteen different political measures taken by the King that go in the direction of making Morocco a modern, more democratic society (*Tequel* 2005).³ This change has not gone unnoticed by some dissidents and political opponents of Hassan II, who argue that under the new sovereign 'a lot of things have truly changed and that the pace of change has been good. Society in general is a lot freer. A lot of 'old faces' at the top have disappeared and have been replaced by educated young Moroccans who have the ability and the honesty that the previous generation did not have' (interview with author 2005). As another put it: 'the King has not been able to fully tackle economic underdevelopment, but the political

atmosphere is certainly very different from the times of Hassan II. There is a sense of ‘liberalism’ that has invested society’ (interview with author 2005).

Despite the introduction of some important progressive reforms such as the new family code and the symbolism that the dismissal of figures associated with the previous era of repression represents, the new King has certainly maintained full control over the political system and policy-making. In fact, it can be argued that Morocco’s democratization has stalled since the late 1990s (Cavatorta 2005). During this time, coercion and brutal repression have however not been the primary reason for the endurance of the incumbent and the new King seems to have mastered the art of co-optation and ‘divide and rule.’ The strong reliance on *divide et impera* measures is due, mainly, to two factors. On the one hand, Moroccan society needed to breathe some fresh air, as it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain such strict control over it. Hassan II understood this and he introduced liberalising reforms that have picked up pace under Mohammed VI. On the other hand, the international community has become much more reluctant to turn a blind eye on widespread repression and human rights abuses in countries that are privileged partners on the international scene. All this has therefore led the sovereign and his advisers to rely almost completely on a strategy of survival based on the perception of the King’s indispensability through careful manipulation and management of the country’s political and social actors. As mentioned above, political parties have been co-opted for some time and emptied of their significance because they do not play at all the same role that they perform in established democracies; quite the contrary. Most ordinary citizens believe that political parties are discredited and cannot be agents for change. According to leading activists in the civil society movement:

'parties are completely discredited, they suffer from both an internal democratic deficit and excessive personalism' (interview with author 2005). In this context, the King appears to be the only political actor who can rise above the petty infighting and squabbles that characterise the Moroccan party system. The only political party that might challenge the King, the Islamist PJD, exercises a form of self-censorship and deliberately chose not to do well at the 2002 elections for fear of regime reprisals (Willis 2004). The state of the party system has led to the depoliticisation of the Moroccan citizenry, allowing the King to appear as the only dynamic and active actor, who needs to be 'left alone' to work for the improvement of the country (Maghraoui 2002).

Mohammed VI's success in remaining in power and continuing to be perceived as indispensable for a democratization that never seems to lead to the establishment of a system truly based on popular mandate is also due to his ability to play on the divisions that characterise the burgeoning civil society sector.

Some of the literature on democratisation contends that civil society activism is of fundamental importance for any process of democratisation and that in the absence of a formal political opposition organised around political parties (as was the case for instance in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s) civil society organisations can take on the role of effective opposition and enter into a bargaining game with the incumbent authoritarian ruler and force them to democratise the system. As Entelis (1996, p. 46) put it: 'without a well developed civil society, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have an atmosphere supportive of democracy.' Accordingly, there has been much enthusiasm focusing on the surge of civil society activism following the ending of restrictions in the late 1990s. Indeed, Morocco has witnessed the arrival on the scene of numerous

organisations concerned with issues ranging from rural development to human rights to more specific women's rights to social exclusion. The vast majority of these organisations do not have explicit political objectives, but the issues they care about have an indirect influence on how policy-making is structured and therefore their work has profound consequences on how the royal palace deals with them. Such activism has not however led to an acceleration of the process of democratisation nor to a weakening of the authoritarian set-up. Given the multitude of social, political and economic problems, some predicted that the King was 'rendering his throne fragile to such an extent that he risks losing it' (Tuquoi 2001, p. 316) but the evidence does not seem to support this analysis. The activism of civil society on a number of fronts and the pressure of their demands has, paradoxically, strengthened the King's grip on power. After having continued in the manipulation of the party system to serve the interests of the Crown in the tradition of his father, the King has been able to do the same with civil society for a number of reasons.

First of all, the King has played on the profound differences that exist between the secular and the Islamist sectors of civil society activism. Far from being the civil society that many secular liberals in Europe and in the United States would want it to be, civil society in the Middle East and North Africa is largely Islamist. This is not only a problem for the regime, but an opportunity as well because it allows the incumbent to replicate the strategy adopted in the formal political arena. Thus, the King has been very active in promoting reforms that are very dear to Moroccan liberal elites such as the reform of the family code aimed at granting legal equality to women in order to provoke a negative reaction from some conservative Islamist associations. By pushing this agenda, he has

secured a high degree of legitimacy with NGOs involved in making these demands such as 'Springtime for Equality' (a feminist association) or the CIOFEM while exposing vast sectors of Islamism as regressive for opposing the reform. This type of strategy is destined to separate the opposition and has so far worked quite well. In an interview a high-ranking member of a leading human rights group, this point emerged quite strongly. He affirmed that: 'the rise of Islamism represents a danger for democracy in Morocco because the vast majority of them does not believe [sic] in the universal values of representative democracy' (interview with author 2005). The outcome of this strategy is that the King comes to represent the indispensable figure through which the objectives that some secular liberal NGO's have can be achieved and while this may represent a victory in the short-term, it also solidifies unequal power relations.

Secondly, the King has not only succeeded in dividing the Islamist and liberal-secular camps, but he has also managed to divide each camp to control it better. The clearest example of this is the strategy employed to exploit the differences that exist among Islamist associations. Not only has Mohammed VI been able to lure into the political system a moderate Islamist party, but he also plays on the theological differences and personal rivalries that characterise two of the largest Islamist associations: the *Jamiat al-adl* led by Sheikh Yassine and the *Tariqa Boutchichiya* led by Sheikh Hamza. There is very little doubt that the 'attitude towards Moroccan Islamism will condition the democratic future of the country' (Jamai 2005, p. 3) and dealing with the phenomenon is of particular importance. In order to marginalise what most analysts consider the most popular, uncompromising, best organised and most vocal opponent of the monarchy (the *Jamiat al-Adl*), it is not only necessary to permit the existence in parliament of an

Islamist party that would sap support for Sheikh Yassine by integrating the system, but it is imperative to also compete at the societal level to weaken its appeal to the religious sectors of society.. Thus, the monarchy entertains privileged relations with the *Tariqa* and its leaders. This alliance is possible because the *Tariqa* does not challenge the *imarat al mouminine* and does not believe that the association should be directly engaged in politics, but should instead only be concerned with the betterment of the individual members. The King therefore supports the *Tariqa* in order to strengthen his religious legitimacy and to have privileged access to the religious bourgeoisie that the association represents. In exchange, the *Tariqa* enjoys freedom from scrutiny and, occasionally, obtains political favours like the royal appointment of the leader's son to the post of governor of the Berkane province (*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* February 2005). The *Jamia al-Adl* is much more radical in that it refuses to be co-opted into the system and believes that the monarchy should at least retreat from active politics if not disappear completely in order for Morocco to become a republic. With respect to the PJD, the spokesperson of the *Jamiat* had this to say: 'theirs is a hypocritical stance because they participate in government. They are just pretending to be in opposition to the ruler; in reality they are fully part of the *Makhzen*' (interview with author 2005).

Thirdly, the King has decided to enter civil society through the creation of organisations and foundations that are formally independent, but are in actuality connected to the royal palace and dependent on it for funding. Given that raising funds is 'probably the most significant difficulty that the sector encounters' (interview with author 2005), the cash rich foundations that the King sponsors have the ability to penetrate civil society and show the general population that the King cares about their wellbeing. In fact,

most of the charities established by the palace deal with issues such as rural poverty, urban regeneration and human development initiatives. This strategy again is aimed, on the one hand, at containing the Islamists on the terrain they privilege (social services) and, on the other, at providing funds for organisations that will inevitably gravitate politically around the palace.

In recent times, it was hoped and argued that Islamists and ‘true democrats’ of secular, liberal leanings would be able to finally strike up some sort of alliance to make democratic demands on the incumbents. Their alliance would fulfil the conditions that O’Donnell and Schmitter (1987) talked about in their seminal work on transition to democracy and some researchers have indeed begun to analyse the changes taking place within Islamism in order to make it more conducive to undertake political actions within a pluralist context, while others have concentrated their attention on secular groups and their attitudinal changes towards Islamism. The logic of this is that, given the constraints they face in operating in authoritarian environments, they suffer from the same difficulties (Cavatorta 2006). Also, they both reject the way power is exercised by unelected authoritarian elites. There should therefore be room for a tactical alliance. This is possibly taking place in some countries, as the case of Egypt seems to indicate (Abdel Latif 2005). In the case of Morocco however the evidence seems to suggest that the country is quite a long way from witnessing the same process of rapprochement that Egypt is apparently experiencing between the different sectors of the opposition.

There is a degree of co-operation between Islamist associations and secular ones on certain matters such as campaigns for the better treatment of prisoners, for an end to torture or for more press freedom, but these are very selective issues. Both sets of actors

recognise this as an important step, but it is not envisaged for the moment to take these initiatives to a different level, where the demands for change would be more systematic. In fact, when asked about the possibility of the occurrence of an Egyptian scenario on the alliance between secular and Islamist associations, the *Jamiat* coolly answered: 'at this moment in time no' (interview with author). Key figures in the associational movement in Casablanca gave the same type of answer.

Far from weakening the monarchy, the activism of civil society constitutes an asset for the King because the ideological differences that exist within the NGO sector and the diversity of issues they represent can be utilised to pick partners and rivals according to the changing situation. Thus, the promotion of the family code reform has guaranteed the King the support of large sectors of the urban secular elites, who have become even more afraid of Islamism because the *Jamiat* for instance opposed such reform. In addition, the lack of a truly responsive and functioning party system means that lobbying from civil society has to target the monarch rendering him indispensable if change is to be made on the issue that a given NGO is interested in promoting. This indispensable role, 'sacralised' in certain cases by the religious legitimacy the monarch enjoys, further strengthens his grip on the executive.

Conclusion

The findings from the examination of Morocco in the context of the persistence of authoritarianism contribute to a better understanding of the endurance of such phenomena and, while generalisations from one case study should not be made, it indicates trends that might be applicable to other countries in the region and authoritarian regimes across the globe.

First of all, Morocco shows quite clearly that blunt repression is by no means the sole strategy that incumbents employ to remain in power. The hypothesis that co-optation and 'divide and rule' play a significant if not decisive role is borne out, particularly over the last decade when the costs of repression for authoritarian leaders have increased substantially due in particular to external constraints. The ability of the Moroccan monarchy to play on the differences that characterise the political opposition is beyond doubt and is due mainly to the presence of political Islamism, which has a contentious and divisive nature. While it is true that strategies of divide and rule have always been central to all political systems in the Middle East and North Africa, the case of Morocco demonstrates clearly how the strategy has been refined over the course of the last few years when, supposedly, a certain degree of liberalisation has occurred.

Secondly, Morocco shows that a new ruler is not necessarily going to employ tactics that will undermine his own power. Mohammed VI was hailed as a potential liberator, a democratiser and as the King of the Poor, but he has instead shown quite considerable skill in manipulating the opposition and in strengthening his own rule. His success resides on having increased the degree of pluralism in the country while at the same time retaining this position as the ultimate decision-maker. The regime may have changed to some extent, but it remains authoritarian in nature.

Thirdly, the case of Morocco confirms what Vickie Langohr (2004) and Wictorowicz (2000) hypothesised when analysing the role of civil society in the region. Far from being a factor of democratisation, civil society activism seems to represent a golden opportunity for the incumbent to strengthen his position by further weakening political parties and by making social change dependent on access to him. Some civil

society actors recognise this. One representative of a leading NGO openly admitted that this type of institutional arrangement with the King at head of a liberalised autocracy is likely to continue for a long time, while another stated that: 'the problem is that we need political parties and their voice, but not these parties' (interview with author 2005) if democratic reforms are to be introduced seriously and systematically.

However, the outlook may not be as bleak as it might appear from this analysis precisely because the reforms Mohammed VI introduced may have unforeseen consequences, particularly at civil society level. There is for instance the realisation that the success of civic activism is very much King-dependent and that this has in turn rather negative consequences for radical change at systemic institutional level. The very realisation of this on the part of activists might actually be the first step towards a change in behaviour *vis à vis* the royal power. Given that the repressive option is increasingly difficult to use, this has important consequences. There are indications that co-operation between very different groups is taking place and, while this has yet to lead to formal shared demands on the regime, this option is not as remote as it was a decade ago. *Divide et impera* is still very effective, but for how long?

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¹ The interview appeared in *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 23-29 April, 2005, p. 28.

² See what can be considered the association and Yassine's political manifesto at <http://www.yassine.net/lettres/memorandum.htm>. Accessed on 22/7/2003.

³ *Telquel Magazine*, Special Issue, No. 187-188, August-September 2005, 20-39.