

SUMMARY - MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Driss El Yazami has been a human rights advocate in Morocco and Europe for most of his professional life. In 2011 he was appointed chairman of Morocco's National Human Rights Council, an organization created to protect citizens' rights and raise awareness of human rights across Moroccan society. Prior to chairing the Human Rights Council, Mr. Yazami was a member of Morocco's Advisory Council on Human Rights and the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which documented and publicized past human rights abuses in Morocco. He also served previously as vice president of the French League of Human Rights and as secretary general of the International Federation of Human Rights. He is the author of numerous reports and articles and studied in both Morocco and France. ■

Human Rights Perspectives in Morocco

Morocco is trying to build democracy step-by-step, though it faces many challenges ahead, according to Driss El Yazami. Mr. El Yazami is the president of Morocco's National Human Rights Council (CNDH). The human rights council was established in mid-2011, and it evolved from the Advisory Council on Human Rights (CCDH) established in the early 1990s. El Yazami spoke at a Maghreb Roundtable entitled "Human Rights Perspectives in Morocco" on April 7, 2014.

El Yazami contended that Morocco and other Arab nations must oversee reforms peacefully, without foreign intervention or violence, while building civil society and democratic institutions. He argued that before the Arab uprisings in 2011 Morocco had already embarked on its own reform path based on three human rights components: gender equality, pluralism, and transitional justice. First, a new family code adopted in 2004 sought to safeguard the rights of women and children. Second, Morocco established the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in 2001 in order to recognize and celebrate its cultural pluralism—an important and sensitive issue for Arab and African countries. Third, Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission provided a forum for transitional justice. From 2004 to 2006, the Commission examined Morocco's past human rights abuses and allowed victims to tell their stories in public forums, including on television. All three of these human rights issues were widely debated across Moroccan society.

After the Arab uprisings of 2011, Morocco took additional steps to strengthen its commitment to human rights, according to El Yazami. For example, nearly 60 out of 180 provisions within Morocco's new constitution relate to human rights. The creation of the CNDH was another milestone. The organization has played an active role in Morocco since its founding three years ago by publishing reports, visiting prisons and hospitals, and presenting recommendations to the government on a range of human rights issues. After considering a report from the council, for example, the king implemented a new policy on asylum and migration that aligns with international human rights standards, El Yazami noted. The parliament is also set to debate several

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The CSIS Maghreb Roundtable was launched in May 2013 to provide a deeper understanding of economic, social, political, and security developments within individual states in the Maghreb, as well as how these dynamics intersect across North Africa and what their implications are for U.S. policy. The roundtable assembles a diverse group of North African and U.S. regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders, seeking to provide a forum for the exchange of views. ■

new human rights-related laws including laws to combat violence against women and child labor, protect press freedom, and end military tribunals.

Despite important progress, El Yazami also acknowledged that significant political, economic, demographic, and human rights challenges lay ahead. According to El Yazami, Morocco currently has over 45,000 NGOs, which is both a testament to the progress the country has made as well as the challenges remaining in building a robust civil society. A third of these NGOs operate on a budget of less than five hundred dollars and function without an office. El Yazami explained that Morocco should provide funding, offices, and training to these groups because civil society, not just legislation, is needed to push the country forward.

In El Yazami's view, the most important political and human rights reforms in Morocco were the result of interaction between the monarchy, legislature, civil society activists, researchers, and the international community. He sees this as an asset to the Moroccan system, and he stressed the importance of a continued role for the monarchy in the political process. At the same time, he feels that it will be crucial for the Moroccan parliament to become more active and involved within the Moroccan political system.

Additional challenges lie ahead. In Morocco, 51 percent of the population is under 25 years old; there are conservative actors within Morocco who question the universality of human rights; and more than 100,000 child laborers still work within the country today. Contentious political issues, such as addressing the aspirations and varied political views of the people of Western Sahara, are also a challenge. CNDH is also active in Western Sahara, and El Yazami noted that regional human rights commissions have organized more than twenty seminars on human rights in Western Sahara over the last two years, with attendees including police officers and members of the Polisario Front. Morocco also built a museum about the history of Western Sahara, and it is now developing school curricula with lessons about Sahrawi culture, he added.

El Yazami noted that while he believes strongly that Western Sahara is an integral part of Morocco, he respected fellow Moroccans' right to hold different political views. When asked about limitations on peaceful assembly in Western Sahara, he explained that some Sahrawi NGOs

have not acquired necessary permits from the Ministry of Interior, but that they should have the right to argue their case in front of the tribunal which arbitrates such matters.

Regardless of the difficulties ahead, El Yazami believes that Morocco will pursue its own path toward democracy based on peaceful public debate. The fact that citizens have shown a capacity to debate sensitive issues in an open, pluralist, and non-violent manner leads him to conclude that the conditions for human rights and democratic governance are ripe in Morocco. ■

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