

**Morocco: The Islamist Awakening  
and Other Challenges**

*Marvine Howe*

*London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 428 pages.*

Veteran journalist Marvine Howe's book on Morocco is unique in its genre. Though she worked for Radio Maroc and as a stringer for the New York Times and Time-Life in Morocco from 1951 to 1962, Howe has covered several topics related to that country since and returned for a serious "Tour du Maroc" with two old friends in 2001. Her book, with its countless interviews of political and cultural personalities before and after her departure in the 1960s, is more than simply journalism. Howe has invested a lifetime of studying Morocco and its people. This book, addressed to a general audience, reads like a comprehensive "state of the union" survey of Morocco today, in its variegated political, cultural, ethnic, religious, and economic aspects – all in a lucid and often elegant prose.

Howe has kept up with all of the major works on Morocco over the years, both in French and in English, from John Waterbury's *The Commander of the Faithful* (1970) to Fatima Sadiqi's *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco* (2002). Even the more recent book by Shana Cohen and Larabi Jaidi, *Morocco: Globalization and Its Consequences* (2006), shares many of her conclusions.

Yet more than the academic cachet of her writing, it is the sheer magnitude (in numbers of people and span of years) of her personal knowledge of Moroccan opinion leaders that commends this research project. Already in the 1950s, she authored *The Prince and I* and *One Woman's Morocco*, close-up views of the royal family and the events and actors behind them that led to Morocco's independence. From the archives of the Moroccan Socialist Party comes a picture of opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka (who later tragically disappeared in France) with the author by his side (p. 106). Relentlessly, in the 1950s and again since the late 1990s, she has interviewed scores of people, including numerous visits with Nadia Yassine, the daughter of the outspoken Islamist leader Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, from 1995 to 2004. Hence, most of the footnotes refer to personal interviews with people across the sociopolitical spectrum.

Nonetheless, Howe's forte is also her weakness, at least for those readers interested in a detached, academic piece of writing. Howe clearly loves Morocco; she is fascinated by its history and the implications of its present challenges and easily falls into the role of a passionate outside player who, on the one hand, admits that only Moroccans can decide what is best for Morocco, but it seems that she cannot refrain from dishing out advice about the best way forward politically.

Notice the book's outline. A first section ("Return to Morocco") chronicles the 1999 transition from Hassan II to his son Mohammed VI and offers a traveler's guide based on her own 2001 tour around the country. This is followed by two chapters outlining Morocco's past, with the greatest emphasis on the autocratic rule of Hassan II (whose "long shadow" still haunts the present). The third part, "Society in Motion," depicts the effervescence of contemporary Moroccan society, from "the Islamic revival" to the stirrings of female emancipation movement (in both its secular and religious varieties), and from the Berber cultural awakening to the growing chasm between the sprawling urban slums and the scions of the new market economy.

Significantly, the last part is entitled "Royal Democracy." Howe's thesis can thus be summarized: if the palace would relinquish some of its quasi-absolute power to the Moroccan government, then some of the positive steps taken by the new king would bear fruit. Even before the fateful Casablanca

bombings of 16 May 2003, strong voices among the press, civil society, the moderate Islamist parties, the Amazigh (Berber) movement, and political figures in and out of government were clamoring for change. The Islamists too must be given a share in policymaking; the administration should be empowered to courageously tackle the endemic problems of corruption, unemployment, illiteracy, and “abysmal healthcare” (p. 379); and, finally, the king should show the way to a compromise with regard to the Western Sahara conflict and grant the region some measure of autonomy.

Some readers will no doubt bristle at Howe’s liberal-secular bias in places. For instance, she writes that “there was no Islamist problem” during her first stay in Morocco (p. 136); that for her, the veil represents “that symbol of a retrograde Islam” (p. 149); and that until the issue of the new family code (the *Mudawana*) came up in conversations with Nadia Yassine, she had “appeared quite reasonable” (p. 166). Laying this aside, one has to acknowledge that Howe has invested a good deal of energy in probing experts, reading about and trying to understand the current Islamic resurgence in its political dimensions. In the end, she comes to realize that because Islamic spirituality is so much at the core of Moroccan identity, democracy in Morocco will have to integrate the religious voices within its register. This will also be necessary in view of the fact that the slum dwellers have proven quite open to the ideology of militant groups. As she rightly points out, recent history shows that police repression will not erase this kind of militancy.

To sum up, we are indebted to Howe’s meticulous summary of Morocco’s current potential and challenges. As in any work, once its particular perspective and agendas are uncovered, the wealth of information it contains, presented so vividly and clearly here, can be mined and exploited in many directions.

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