



The Pollbearer

A Letter from Rabat

A.M. SPIEGEL

There is a dark, narrow corridor in Rabat's old walled medina, past the plastic fruit, pirated DVDs, previously owned sandals and other *souk* castoffs, where the street beggars come to unwind. Tucked away from the hyperactive intersection of Mohammed V and Hassan II avenues, they can put down their crutches and relax with a lukewarm bowl of *bissara*, a gooey green fava bean soup.

When King Mohammed VI first inherited the throne nearly eight years ago, these were just the sort of citizens expected to attract the modernizing 36-year-old's royal gaze. His interest in those less fortunate even earned him the nickname, "King of the Poor." But now in his forties, married, with a second child just born, Mohammed VI faces a much tougher political challenge: consolidating power in the wake of the country's upcoming elections. One recent step in that direction, however, might seem puzzling.

No political leader takes pleasure in unfavorable polls. But not many would go so far as to ban polling altogether. The government of Morocco is now considering doing just that, with a bill that would make polling next to impossible. What would compel such a draconian

measure in a country long held up as the poster child of reform in the region?

It is now fashionable to blame the United States for just about any setback in the Arab world, but this time it really is America's fault—or more accurately, one of America's premier overseas democracy promotion organizations: the International Republican Institute (IRI), one of the four constituent parts of the National Endowment for Democracy. The IRI came to Morocco in 2002 to help foster a new era of democratization and transparency. Morocco, and especially its capital, Rabat, seemed a site for easy victories—a place handpicked by the Bush Administration to host its inaugural "Forum for the Future", where cybercafés seem to outnumber teleboutiques, and where the former Soviet cultural center is now a thriving McDonald's.

Instead, with the commissioning and subsequent bungling of a shocking poll on Moroccan politics, the IRI has quite possibly dealt liberalization efforts here a major setback. Nobody said democracy promotion would be easy in this thorny part of the world, but the IRI managed a trifecta of error: It helped strike a blow against all future polling operations in the country; it damaged America's already ailing reputation and muddled its foreign policy objectives; and it alienated one of America's strongest allies in the Arab world.

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Associated Press

Saad Eddine el-Othmani, leader of the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development, works a crowd in Rabat, February 3, 2006.

The banner headline jumpstarted the election season early last year by declaring the unimaginable: “*Demain, Les Islamistes.*” Morocco, one of the most liberal of the Arab states, would soon be governed by Islamists. The popular French-language Moroccan newsmagazine, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, was not simply stirring up secular fears; it was reporting the findings of a leaked American-funded poll.

According to the IRI’s national survey of Moroccans, the Islamists of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) would trounce all other parties and gain an unprecedented 47 percent of the popular vote in the country’s autumn 2007 parliamentary elections. In a country long known for its moderation, these results were staggering.

The IRI actually conducted a series of three

polls over the course of a year beginning in late 2005, with each mirroring the original bombshell results. According to the IRI’s Morocco director, Sarah Johnson, the data drew on a nationally representative sample of around 1,500 urban and rural voters. However it was conducted, the IRI poll catapulted the PJD to the forefront of the political arena, instantly anointing them as frontrunners and lavishing unprecedented attention—and scrutiny—on Rabat’s newest power brokers. And to many Moroccans, the favorable poll also appeared to give the Islamists the blessing of not just the Republican Party but the U.S. government itself. The newspaper *Maroc Hebdo International* soon featured a caricature of the PJD’s bearded leader—bedecked in a cowboy hat *and* grasping prayer beads, with President Bush by his side—above an article describing the newfound “*grand amour*” between America and Morocco’s Islamists.

The Alaouite palace is still in damage control mode. The year began with the King dispatching

his Prime Minister to France to quell European fears of an Islamist takeover. In Morocco, analysis of the poll results and the events surrounding its publication remain a favorite spectator sport. What has had poll watchers and the inevitable conspiracy theorists particularly energized is the fact that the IRI-commissioned survey was always intended to be secret. It was supposed to be seen only by official representatives from the political parties, not the general public. To the apparent surprise of the IRI (but not to anyone who had ever worked a day in this part of the world), the poll was leaked. Original IRI documents and slides soon showed up in a major local news weekly. Questions immediately swirled: Why was the poll commissioned? Why was it secret? And, most controversially, who was it intended to help? Were the Americans trying

to bolster the Islamists, or were they trying to undermine them?

Whatever the answers, there seemed to be general agreement on one major point: This was U.S. meddling, or, as the Moroccan media called it, “American interference.” No one seemed pleased—the Moroccan monarchy, the U.S. government, the Islamists or even the Leftists. No one except, perhaps, for the IRI, which became a household name in Morocco overnight.

In the end, the entire poll affair might tell us as much about the disorganization of American democracy promotion in the Arab world as it does about the challenges of rising Islamist popularity throughout the region. It is also a cautionary tale about the extent to which little-known and little-supervised non-governmental organizations are directly conducting policy in the Arab world—sometimes in collusion with the U.S. government and sometimes in collision with it.

To many Moroccans, the IRI’s (mis)adventures in political polling quickly became known as the “American poll” or, in French, “*sondage américain*.” *Le Journal* even called it “*la bombe du sondage américain*.” While the “American” label might be somewhat misleading, who could really blame Moroccans for interpreting this as an official U.S. government-sponsored endeavor? Most Americans, let alone foreigners, could hardly be expected to navigate the complex, messy and often overlapping world of acronyms that make up on-the-ground U.S. democracy promotion around the world. In Morocco alone, the IRI works alongside numerous other organizations like the National Democratic Institute, the American Bar Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for International Development at the State University of New York, and IFES (which used to be known as the International Foundation for Election Systems but, like Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs or “Diddy”, now prefers the punchiness of just one word).

Each of these government contractors—or in Embassy parlance, “implementers”—is funded in whole or in part by the U.S. Congress, mostly via the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Elizabeth Cheney’s contrivance,

the Middle East Partnership Initiative, known invariably as MEPI. All work closely with the U.S. Embassy and the USAID office in Rabat. Most staffers live in the same exclusive Souissi neighborhood of Rabat and send their kids to the American School in town. Many even lunch together at the “American Club” down the street from the Embassy compound. If IRI activity isn’t distinctly “American”, then what is?

The IRI poll immediately unleashed a tidal wave of activity, responses, punditry, posturing and, of course, conspiracy theories. There were critics who argued passionately that the poll showed unmistakable American support for the main Islamist party—indeed, only the most recent expression in a long string of American endorsements for the PJD. Earlier in the year, it was pointed out, the IRI had paid for representatives from Turkey’s governing moderate Islamist AKP party to travel to Morocco to train their political brethren.

Fueling conspiracy theories even further was the fact that around the time the poll was released, PJD Secretary-General Saad Eddine el-Othmani made his first-ever trip to the United States as part of the State Department’s International Visitor Program. While there, he received the “Muslim Democrat of the Year Award” from the Washington-based Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (which incidentally opened a new branch office in Casablanca in January 2006). Although the center is a private institute, the award was handed out at a conference attended by, among others, current and former State Department officials. In Washington, Othmani was also feted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

And then there was the other, opposite and more sinister line of argument: The poll was released by the Americans to hurt the Islamists. This salacious theory was based on the premise that nothing could possibly be worse for the Islamist opposition than to be tainted by the same mark that has wreaked havoc on ruling regimes throughout the Arab world—the support of George W. Bush. A dubious American “blessing” might just be able to do what demoralized Leftists, an increasingly unpopular ruling coalition, and even the King have been unable to do: stop the Islamists! According to imaginative Moroccan cynics, the IRI ploy was

a new, even more clever U.S. strategy to finally put an end to a string of Islamist victories that had been hammering away at Washington's push for Arab democratization. If Islamists were elected in Morocco, a country often held up by the Bush Administration as the model for its successes, then what combination of ills could be anticipated for the Administration's regional democratization campaign?

If the PJD's swift reaction to the poll was any indication, it was not an honor they welcomed. One of the party's senior leaders, clean-shaven economics professor Lahcen Daoudi, was soon on national television questioning the poll's methodology and scientific accuracy. Othmani also chimed in, claiming that "the sample questioned by the IRI was not representative."

The poll may have also revitalized a tired amalgamation of leftist parties, forcing them to take seriously an opponent they might have otherwise dismissed. With an oversized photo of the PJD leader grinning in the background, a recent cover of *Le Journal* summed up this newfound unity in the wake of the IRI fiasco: "*Tous contre les islamistes!*" Significantly, the poll's findings have become a new reference point for efforts to stir up fears of Islamist ascendance in Morocco. A sampling of recent banner headlines from liberal-leaning press outlets testifies to this newfound suspicion: "When Morocco is Islamist" or "The Islamic Show of Force" or "What if the PJD Seized Power?" Not to mention a recent issue of France's respected newsmagazine *Le Point* that cited the IRI poll as the basis for its cover story on the growing "Islamist challenge" facing the Moroccan monarchy.

The poll's impact on broader democratization efforts has also been in dispute. There is talk in Rabat these days in politically attentive circles that the survey interfered with efforts for sweeping electoral reform by making the government wary of any changes that might help the PJD. Government proposals to move up the election date or to redraw voting districts have only been met with PJD cries of "undemocratic behavior." On the other hand, an unnamed "European diplomat" told the paper that first leaked the poll that it "weakens the ability of the interior ministry to fiddle

with election results."

The one indisputable outcome was the increased notoriety and subsequent media attention showered on the IRI. When it released a much more mundane poll on political participation ahead of the 2002 elections, an IRI press release gushed that the "poll made front page headlines." This time they got more than they bargained for, and it didn't have to be this way. The founder of *Le Journal* told me in his Casablanca office this past summer that he actually approached the IRI before going to press. Aboubakr Jamaï, the Yale and Oxford-trained newsman, is also a past recipient of the International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists, as well as a regular viewer of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Jamaï handed the IRI a deal of a lifetime: He offered to publish the results as a joint American-Moroccan venture. Acceptance of this proposition by the IRI would have dramatically reduced the negative political clutter that surrounded ultimate publication. It was an obvious opportunity to advance cooperation and openness. It is also obvious that the IRI squandered the opportunity.

As the September election draws near, the full effects of the poll remain uncertain. The Moroccan press, for one, has already taken to calling Othmani the "next Prime Minister." Yet the final power to appoint the Prime Minister still rests with the royal palace. In Morocco's constitutional monarchy, questions still linger as to whether the winners of the next elections will earn the coveted position. It didn't happen after the last election in 2002, when King Mohammed went outside the realm of the parties and chose the apolitical technocrat Driss Jettou as Prime Minister. The King has promised, however, that he will respect the fall 2007 elections. Then again, that was before the Islamists seemed to be the party in the lead.

The poll's greatest impact might have been to give the PJD the one thing it most lacked: international credibility and standing. The real question facing its leadership was whether the relatively new political party was ready to govern. The poll and a recent slew of trips to Europe by its senior members offer voters as-

surances that if the PJD were elected, Morocco would not risk estrangement (particularly economic) from its American and European friends.

The survey may have also had a rallying effect on the PJD's most loyal followers, if a visit to the party's annual youth convention in Meknes is any indication. Even while its leaders continue to distance themselves from the survey, the party's base tends to draw a different conclusion. A number of the young party activists who gathered during the last week in August quizzed me (in Moroccan Arabic), bursting with the pride of winners, "*Wash shefti sondage?!?*" (Did you see the poll?)

The results of the elections will offer the final word, as one high ranking IRI official indicated when I asked her if the poll had, in fact, bolstered the PJD. Pointing out the double-edged sword of frontrunner status, the staffer wondered if I remembered what had happened to Howard Dean during the Democratic presidential primaries in 2004. If only Middle Eastern politics were so predictable. 🌐

Thucydides, Really!

In his insightful article on Thucydides (January/February 2007), Eliot Cohen says that "the realist's ideal is a Talleyrand or a Metternich or more latterly a de Gaulle; a cold-eyed, pragmatic, ruthless pursuer of hard national interest [who has little regard for the idealism of] a Woodrow Wilson or, in more recent times, a neoconservative." In fact, American realists have models much closer to home: Theodore Roosevelt, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington. While the young Theodore Roosevelt went through an expansionist "neo-conservative" phase in the 1890s, as President he came to believe that America had overextended itself by annexing the Philippines. Similarly, Washington and Hamilton, whom Roosevelt greatly admired, favored a policy of neutrality toward France and Britain rather than Jefferson's "idealistic" belief that America should create "an Empire of Liberty" with republican France. Jefferson's favorite word was liberty; Washington's and Hamilton's favorite word was interest, the most frequently used

noun in the Farewell Address, which Hamilton drafted.

Putting aside the American realist tradition, were Talleyrand, Metternich and de Gaulle simply ruthless pragmatists? Talleyrand pursued his own interests ruthlessly but France's interests moderately. He consistently denounced the Revolution's political violence, and resigned as Napoleon's Foreign Minister because he opposed the Emperor's bid for European hegemony. Metternich pursued Austria's status quo interests somewhat rigidly, but not ruthlessly; he feared that republicanism and nationalism would tear apart not only Austria's empire, but all of Europe. De Gaulle pursued France's interests ruthlessly but not narrowly; he always backed West Germany and the United States in their showdowns with the Soviet Union, and he withdrew from Algeria, despite opposition from conservatives, some of whom almost assassinated him. What unites all six of these men is their rejection of policies that were excessively idealistic like Jefferson's and Wilson's, or that indulged in hubris, like Napoleon's. They would no doubt have agreed with Francis Bacon who warned about politicians who "make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths. . . . their discourses are as the stars which give little light because they are so high."

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An Announcement

I very much regret that my new responsibilities as Counselor to the Department of State will take me away from the magazine for now. Helping to found it has been a great adventure, and I am very proud indeed of what my colleagues and the staff have produced. It will continue to be a source of inspiration and enlightenment as I try to take some of the ideas it has explored and feed them into policies that serve America's interests, in the largest and best sense of the word.

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