

# African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 4  
Summer 2006

## BOOK REVIEW

**Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges. Marvine Howe. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 428 pp.**

Marvine Howe's objective in her book is to deal with the central question as stated in the preface: "Can an absolute Muslim monarchy embrace Western-style democracy in an era of growing confrontation between the Islamic world and the West?"

Relying chiefly on her own experience since she discovered the Moroccan kingdom in the early 1950s, the author presents a comprehensive review of Morocco, its people, past and present. In addition, her work as a freelance journalist in Morocco and then as correspondent for *The New York Times* enabled her to gather a huge and various amount of information about Morocco such as interviews with the most influential figures in Moroccan history before and after independence. When reading every passage of the book, the reader gets the impression that Marvine Howe has mastered the history and geography of Morocco even better than the average Moroccan. What makes Howe's book special is that she raises some issues that were until recently a taboo and mysterious such as "*les années de plomb*" – the years of lead in the 1970s and 1980s, the private life of the former king Hassan II, L'affaire Ben Barka in 1965 and the two serious military coups attempts which nearly succeeded in 1971 and 1972.

Still, it is worth-mentioning that the title of the book may initially give different or even misleading impressions about the content of the book. The subject matter of the book deals with more than just the Islamic awakening. This issue, despite being thoroughly treated, is only one of the aspects addressed by the author. In addition, the author occasionally deals with some incidents and topics in a simplistic way by giving interpretations not based on profound arguments. Nevertheless, Howe has succeeded in objectively addressing Moroccan history and the thorniest political and social challenges facing this modern and pro-Western kingdom.

Howe's book consists of four major parts and each part is divided into different chapters. The first part starts with introducing the new king Mohamed VI, who assumed power in 1999 as an unknown person for most people and swiftly tried to correct the violations of human rights, which took place during the 38-year reign of his father, king Hassan II. The author examines the challenges facing this enigmatic country where the gap between rich and poor is growing rapidly. The second part provides a general historical overview of Morocco. Starting with the original inhabitants of Morocco, the Berbers or Imazighen who inhabited North Africa since the second millennium B.C., Howe deals with different invaders and dynasties that ruled Morocco until the modern history. The author ends this part by shedding light on the era of king Hassan II, which is a critical and controversial period of Moroccan modern history. In the third part, Howe analyzes different factors and challenges facing a society in motion. Beginning with Islamic revival, the author concludes that Morocco can no longer tolerate and take Islamic extremism lightly, especially after the suicide bombings against targets in Casablanca on May 16, 2003. Another issue is that of women's rights movements in the sense that in modern Morocco, women are the most dynamic sector of society. Moroccan women from different social and political spectra are more determined than ever to improve their social, economic and political position. Another topic in this part is that of Moroccan identity. The Moroccan constitution states that the country is a Muslim state with Arabic as an official language and is part of the Arab nation. As a matter of fact, the Moroccan identity is far more complicated inasmuch as Moroccans are a *mélange* of Berber, Islamic, Arab, Jewish and European elements. The final part deals with the new democratic transfer led by the new king Mohamed VI. Among other things, Howe discusses the main challenges facing the monarchy especially the growing Islamic movements. Again, it is worth mentioning in this respect that the author did not entirely succeed in her analysis with regard to Islamic movements in Morocco. It seems that Howe associates all parties and associations based on Islamic ideology with violence whereas moderate Islamists themselves were the first ones who condemned all forms of violence after the attacks in Casablanca in 2003. Howe concludes in her last chapter that the Moroccan kingdom is at the crossroads.

She predicts a gloomy scenario in which the Islamic movement will massively win the parliamentary elections in 2007. Once more, in this book, all movements and associations with Islamic views are illustrated as antithesis to democratic values, which in reality is not the case.

However, in this special and comprehensive work about Morocco, Howe tried to explain why Morocco matters considering its strategic location between Africa and Europe. In addition, Morocco is recently considered by America as a cornerstone in Africa and the Arab world to promote the western liberal democracy and as a loyal ally in fighting against terrorism. Through her first-hand account and her exhaustive review of the historical, social and economic situation of Morocco, Howe has produced a valuable work that is indispensable for everyone interested in this Arab and African kingdom.

Mohammadi Laghzaoui  
*Tilburg University, The Netherlands*