

FEMALE MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL FAMILY IN MODERN MOROCCO: PRIVATE OR PUBLIC ROYALS?



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ABSTRACT

Despite major political uprisings since 2010 known as the “Arab Spring,” Arab monarchies have notably remained stable compared to most other Arab countries, which are mostly republics. Researchers have attempted to clarify the factors resulting in this phenomenon. This paper aims to explain one aspect of the resilience of Morocco, focusing on the roles of the female royal family. Female royals have been given less attention, and in Arab society, speaking of these individuals is considered taboo. However, in the past two decades in Morocco, they have begun to be active in official affairs in the public sphere.

The first part of this paper is a survey of the nation-building process of Morocco after its independence and shows that the legitimacy of the king based on Islam was incorporated within the framework of a modern nation through a nation-building process that promoted the resilience of the Moroccan monarchy. In the latter part, the recent transition regarding the status of female royals is discussed through the public’s reactions to the monarchy and political situations. Finally, this paper considers the influence of the transformation of the Moroccan monarchy from “hidden” to “open royals” on its resilience.

Keywords: “Arab Spring”, Arab monarchies, “hidden” to “open royals”.

This paper aims to explain the role of female members of the royal family in modern Morocco. Due to major political uprisings in the 2010s known as the “Arab Spring,” Arab monarchies have notably remained stable compared to most other Arab countries, which are republics. Researchers have attempted to clarify the factors resulting in this phenomenon. The “rentier state”¹ (Beblawi and Luciani 1987) and “dynastic monarchy”² (Herb 1999) theories are significant for understanding the stability of Arab monarchies, especially in Gulf countries. However, Morocco, which does not possess enough “rents” to be distributed to the population and cannot be governed by members of the royal family by dividing the state’s responsible positions among them, illustrates that the resilience of monarchical regimes remains somewhat puzzling.

¹ In the rentier states theory, rents are defined as effortlessly accrued income streams. Therefore, rentier states can be seen as those whose economies depend on substantial external rents for state revenues (Schwarz, 2012: 121). They incorporate only a fraction of society in the production of rents, while with the government acting as the principal recipient of the wealth, the majority engages in its distribution and utilization (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987: 385). Rentier economies then become “allocation” states, distributing the rents they accrue, uninhibited by the need for taxation levied on productive economic sectors (Luciani, 1990; Hvidt, 2011: 89).

² According to Herb (1999), in 1938 the ruling Al-Sabah family of Kuwait created a new form of government for the Persian Gulf. In that year, the Al-Sabah family expelled merchants from the Kuwaiti bureaucracy and replaced them with members of the royal family. The other Persian Gulf monarchies followed suit. In these types of regimes, which Herb calls “dynastic monarchies,” the monarch typically installs members of the royal family as Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Defense. These and other positions in the bureaucracy are used by the monarch as consolation prizes or bargaining chips to dole out to dissatisfied members of the royal family as a means of building consensus. As a result, these dynastic monarchies are more stable than monarchies wherein the monarch excludes the rest of the royal family from power.

This paper focuses on Moroccan female members of the royal family, who have been given less attention. Further, in Arab society, speaking of these individuals is considered taboo. However, in the past 20 years, female members of the royal family have begun to be active in official affairs in the public sphere. This study tries to consider the recent transition in the status of female royals through the public's reactions to the monarchy and political situations.

1. Nation-Building Processes

Morocco was officially recognized as a state independent of France and Spain on March 2, 1956. Mohammed V, the first king of Morocco, returned to his homeland from Madagascar, ending two years of exile on November 16, 1955. His return advanced his independence movement. Immediately after independence, he intended to establish a constitutional monarchy; however, his rivals, who had fought against France with him, disagreed with this. Mohammed V's idea was embodied in the organization of a constitutional convention through his command in 1960. This convention, composed of 78 persons appointed by the king, was entrusted with establishing a constitution based on the most respected values of Islam and Moroccan tradition by the end of 1962.

Unfortunately, the king's committee dissolved after his death in 1961. His successor, Hassan II, did not follow the methods of his father and worked to establish a constitution by himself using his legal power to command through *zahir*s (royal commands). The first Moroccan constitution was finally promulgated by the king himself with the support of a small advisory group of religious schoolers (*ulamas*) on December 7, 1962. In this constitution, modern institutions such as multi-party electoral systems and a bicameral legislature were included. Traditional political institutions based on Islam, such as the privileges of *sharifs* (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed),³ were also incorporated. One of the aims of this constitution was to centralize all political powers to the king while allowing him to observe opposition groups. The 1962 constitution stated that Morocco is a "democratic and social country" (Article 1) and that sovereignty rests with the people (Art. 24). The document simultaneously instituted a hereditary monarchy (Art. 20) and specified that the nature of the state could not be subject to constitutional revision (Art. 108). The king was acknowledged as the "commander of the faithful" (*amir al-mu'minin*), and his person was declared sacred and inviolable (Art. 23). Among other prerogatives, the monarch gained the power to nominate and dismiss the government ministers. The king also obtained the right to declare a state of emergency (Art. 35), which he used in 1965 to dismiss representative institutions.

Moroccan constitutions have been revised numerous times, but the kings' various titles and positions, particularly his highest position in religion, have not been the target of these thorough revisions. In his political and religious positions, the king has positively encouraged religious activities and practices⁴, but political parties based on religion and the exploitation of religion by political actors are also prohibited. In other words, all political authority centers around the king, who also holds absolute religious power.

Focusing on religious legitimacy that supports royal authority, what kind of legitimacy do these lineages possess? The concept of *baraka* (blessing/blessing power) must be understood here, because *sharifs* inherited *baraka* through their lineages. During the kings' visits around the country, they put their fingers in a bowl of milk or kiss dates held at the reception ceremony, and these

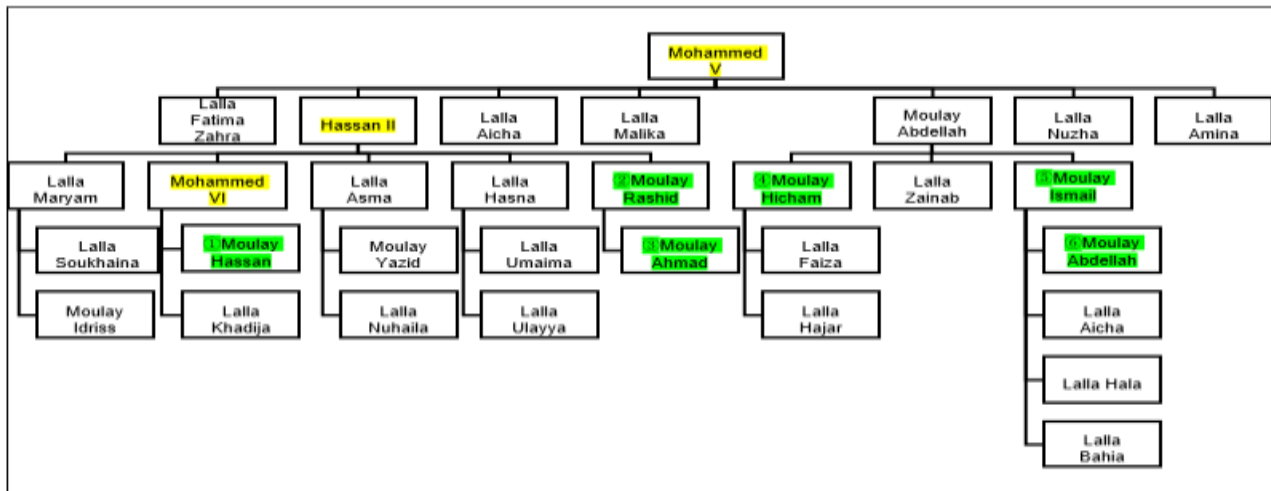
³ The Moroccan king claims he is directly descended from the prophet Mohammed. Since the early fifteenth century, Morocco has been ruled by two sharifian dynasties, namely the Saadi dynasty (1510–1659) and the present Alawis (1659–), whose ruling families are *sharifs*. *sharifs*' respected virtues are widely believed by Muslims of different orientations. However, in Morocco, *sharifs* have received special weight to perceive marabout (a scholar of the Quran, or religious teacher) worship in the context of various historical religious actors in society.

⁴ For example, Mohammed VI encouraged activities such as the extermination of anti-Islamic actions, symposiums and lectures related to Islam, the construction of mosques, and contributions to religious schools and madrasas (Daadaoui 2011: 52).

touched elements were poured or sown on the ground in the belief that they bring fertility. Therefore, *sharīfs* claim sanctity for their authority and are also respected as saints (Waterbury 1970: 144-145). As long as religious spirit flows strongly in Moroccan society, the sharif will be entitled to a certain amount of deference (Waterbury 1970: 97). At the same time, the Moroccan kings hold the title of *amīr al-mu'minīn*, indicating their responsibility for protecting Islam and faith; together with their role as *sharīfs*, their positions are made sacred and their political and religious authority “inviolable.”

3. From the “Mother of the Crown Prince” to the “Princess Consort”

Figure 1: Moroccan Royal Family



Since its independence in 1956, three kings have ruled Morocco: Mohammed V, Hassan II, and Mohammed VI, whose names are highlighted in yellow. Through its historical tradition, male royals are called Amir (prince)/Sharif + Moulay + their last name, and female royals are called Amira (princess)/Sharifa + Lalla + their last name, even though the name “Mohammed” comes after “Sidi” instead of “Moulay.” Names highlighted in green are members of the right of succession. For example, Moulay Hasan, the son of the present King Mohammed VI, is the first in succession to the throne.

Historically and traditionally, in Morocco and the Arab world, the presence of the king’s spouse would be hidden until she gave birth to a boy who would be a crown prince. This means that not much information is available to the public about them, especially if they had not had any sons.

The first Moroccan king, Mohammed V, was thought to have had three wives: Lalla Hanira, who had one daughter; Lalla Abla, who was his cousin and mothered five children, including Hassan II; and Lalla Bahia, who gave birth to a girl. The previous king, Hassan II, married two women who were cousins to each other within a few months of each other: Lalla Fatima, who had never had a child, and Lalla Latifa, who mothered five children, including Mohammed VI. Little was known about Lalla Fatima; conversely, Lalla Latifa was from a famous Berber family and known publicly as the “mother of the crown prince” and the “mother of the royal children.” The royal palace prohibited the publication of her portrait, and the chief editor of the weekly Arabic *Al Ayam* was arrested for putting her photo in his magazine. Hassan II was thought to have married again later in life (Kéchichian 2008: 396)⁵.

The present king, Mohammed VI, married one woman: Lalla Salma⁶, who is a mother of two children, including crown prince Moulay Hasan. From a middle-class family in Fes, she became the

⁵ After the death of Hassan II, Lalla Latifa married to a man who was Hassan II’s bodyguard.

⁶ She graduated from engineering school in university and worked as an information engineer in the biggest Moroccan company, ONA, until her marriage to Mohammed VI.

first princess consort to emerge publicly in Morocco. For the marriage of Mohammed VI and Salma, their engagement was announced a year prior and included her portraits and profiles. From their engagement onward, pictures of the two appeared in public despite not being married yet. Their wedding ceremony was broadcast live on national television, radio, and satellite. Even though a three-day ceremony was postponed and scaled-down because the situation in Palestine worsened, they invited 200 couples and hosted a joint ceremony. Immediately after marriage, the king issued a command that gave her the royal title of “Amira” (Princess) for the first time in Moroccan history. Since then, she has founded the “Lalla Salma Foundation for Cancer Eradication” and served actively for various charitable works.

However, this couple ended their relationship after 15 years. Since the beginning of 2018, Lalla Salma has not engaged in public activities. In February 2018, Mohammed VI was operated on in Paris for an atrial flutter, but Lalla Salma was not photographed among royal family members surrounding the king after his operation. The following month, on the sixteenth anniversary of the king and Salma, Spanish weekly **Hola!** reported that they had already divorced. There were rumors that “the princess was kidnapped” and “she has been trapped in the royal palace.” However, the palace never commented on this topic. The French lawyer of Moroccan royals also called Salma “the king’s ex-wife,” thus their divorce is highly likely.

4. Activities and Official Service of Royal Members

As with other monarchies like England, Moroccan royals positively announced their daily activities and official services, based on the idea that royals embody responsibility, social services, self-sacrifice, stability, dignity, and a country’s moral principles. Therefore, the entire royal family heads numerous organizations and actively works on diplomacy as international goodwill. The central members carrying out these activities are the princess consort, crown prince, and siblings of the king.

As male royals, crown prince Moulay Hassan, age 18, began to join the official services with the king and his brother Moulay Rashid from childhood. He has chaired and participated in prayers for rain, the opening ceremony of nature parks, and sports events. In recent years, he represented the king by receiving guests of the state and participating in the funeral of former French president Jacques Chirac. Moulay Rashid was the only brother of Mohammed VI. He often attends events and conferences at home and abroad instead of the king, who prefers not to attract attention (Zisenwine 2013: 71).

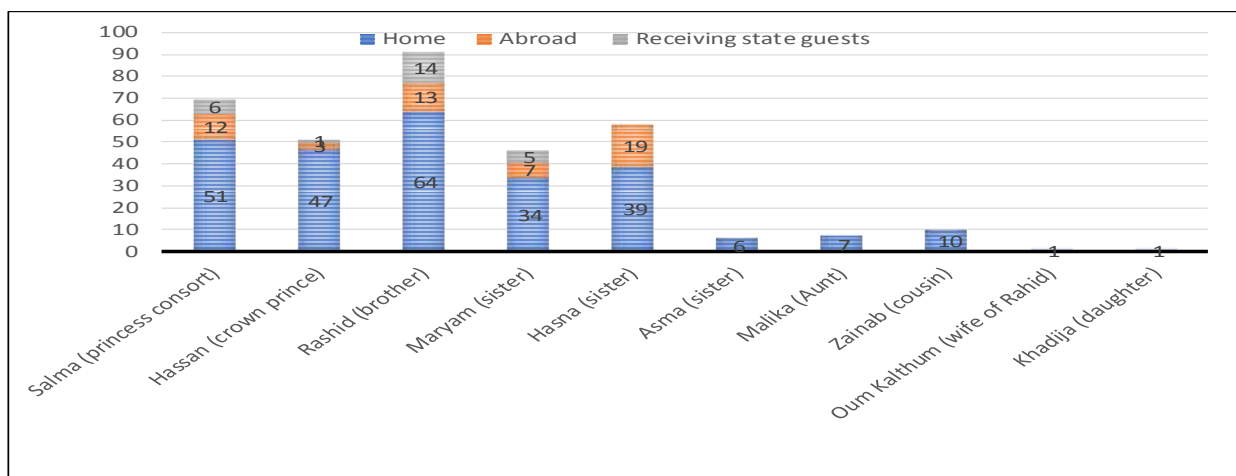


Table 1: Number of Official Services (2013 - 2021)
 Source: Ministry of Youth, Culture and Communication
 (<http://www.mapnews.ma/>)

The king's three sisters – Maryam, Asma, and Hasna – hold numerous prestigious official functions and serve as chairs of various organizations. Lalla Maryam, the older sister of the king who married and divorced Fuad Filali, the ex-CEO of the biggest national company *Omnium Nord-Africain* (ONA), accompanied the king until his marriage and again since his divorce. Princess Maryam has focused on social and cultural activities, and using her royal status, continues to work on behalf of women and children and advocates for their rights internationally. Since the divorce of Mohammed VI and Salma, the presence of his younger sister, Hasna, has been remarkable, especially for activities abroad.

5. Conclusion

Morocco is an Arab monarchy based on the “continuity” and “stability” of its history. Mohammed VI has also undertaken many political and social reforms, one of which is the improvement in the status of women, represented by the reform of family law in 2003⁷. Today, the charitable work of royal members must be publicized and known by the people in the same way as other monarchies in the world. Female royals who began being active in the public sphere became representatives of female leaders and conspicuous figures in their society.

Princess Salma whose status changed from the “mother of crown prince” to the “princess consort” was the most prominent female figure in this period with transitions in the status of women. People felt close to Princess Salma, who was from a normal Moroccan family, and yearned for her happiness in the palace, similar to what has been portrayed in the media. In this way, the image of an ideal woman is produced and established. The activities of other female members have also been reported daily in the media.

Interestingly, in Morocco, the separation of the king and his wife has never been mentioned officially, despite their marriage being reported with banner headlines. Even if Salma had been the only “mother of the crown prince,” their divorce did not need to be declared publicly and did not elicit various rumors. Currently, the king's sister's divorce his niece's cancelled engagement, and discord among royals have been reported by the media. This shows the risks of “opened royals,” such as damage to the image of the royal family. Press reports related to the royal family are increasing; some discuss the royal budget and property, which had been taboo for a long time. The Moroccan monarchy must consider how forthcoming it should be to maintain its stability and what should be hidden.

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⁷ Major components of the reforms in 2004 included raising the minimum legal age of marriage to 18, establishing joint responsibility for the family among men and women, limiting the terms of polygamy and divorce, and granting women more rights in the negotiation of marriage contracts.