

MERIA

POLITICAL ISLAM IN MOROCCO: IS THERE AN "EXCEPTION MAROCAINE"?

Ana Belen Soage*

Contrary to other Arab countries, Morocco has not experienced an "Arab Spring." Those who wish to see systemic change have not been able to get a degree of popular support and mobilization similar to that which brought an end to the dictatorships of Ben Ali in Tunisia, al-Qaddafi in Libya or Mubarak in Egypt. The regime has attributed their failure to the special link between the Moroccan monarchy and its people. However, this article argues that it was the palace's clever maneuvering and, in particular, its pandering to the Islamist lobby, which favored the continuation of the status quo.

Contrary to the other countries that appeared after the French decolonization of the Maghreb, Morocco is a monarchy. Its reigning dynasty, the Alawis, has been ruling the country since the mid-seventeenth century. Its monarch is both the temporal and the religious ruler, both *malik* (king) and *amir al-mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). In fact, he derives his legitimacy from the claim that he is a descendent of Muhammad. The official motto of the country is *Allah, al-malik, al-watan* (God, king, and country), and the picture of the king is omnipresent not only in public buildings, but also in private residences.

In the past, opposition to the monarchy came mainly from sectors of the left, influenced by the "socialist" republics of Algeria and Tunisia or swayed by the effects of the structural adjustment policies imposed on Morocco since the 1980s. King Hassan II reacted with great harshness, and the period between the 1960s to the 1980s of his reign would come to be known as *Sanawat al-rasas* (Years of Lead), in allusion to the regime's repression of dissent. The situation was one of great instability; sections of the army attempted two coups d'état in the early 1970s, and popular discontent culminated in the urban riots of 1981, 1984, and 1990.

There was a hint of change in 1974, when a Muslim shaykh by the name of Abdessalam Yassine published a long letter addressed to

the king in which he questioned his legitimacy and called on him to return to the "Islamic way." In a political commentator's words, "Hassan II was rudely awoken to the fact that there was another opposition to his rule than that of the Left [...]: that of political Islam."¹ However, it was not until the 1980s that Morocco witnessed a real Islamist contestation of the regime.

In fact, in the last decades of the twentieth century, Morocco saw a gradual Islamization, which paralleled what occurred in other Arab and Muslim states. The chief geopolitical reasons behind that process were the 1979-1980 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent 'jihad' in that country. The number of conflicts Muslims have seen themselves involved in since the 1990s, from the war in Bosnia to the invasion of Iraq, have further exacerbated the politicization of Islam. However, one should not underestimate the support--or at least, acquiescence--certain regimes have granted the Islamists, perceived as an antidote to the left.

The consequences of that Islamization are clear in Moroccan society today: The veil is ubiquitous on the streets, in universities, and at the workplace; shaykhs are regular TV interviewees to discuss matters that have little to do with religion; at the same time, sexual harassment--although still moderate by Arab standards²--has become a worry for women. In

fact, according to the last report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 83 percent of Moroccans are in favor of the implementation of the Shari'a, and 92 percent maintain that wives should always obey their husbands.³

In 1999, Hassan II died and was succeeded by his son, Muhammad VI. He seemed keen to promote a progressive agenda and was accordingly perceived as a reformer and welcomed both by liberals at home and in Western capitals. For instance, he pushed for the implementation of the recommendations of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing in 1985, and in 2004 he approved by decree a new Family Code (*Mudawwanat al-Usra*) after being unable to get parliamentary support; and, more recently, he was quick to react to the echoes of the Arab Spring in his country.

The Moroccan version of the Arab Spring, which came to be known as the M20 Movement, took off during the second half of February 2011 with demonstrations across the kingdom. Made up of a variety of composite elements, it brought together students, the unemployed, the left, and shaykh Abdessalam Yassine's (illegal) Organization for Justice and Charity. Their complaints were similar to those of neighboring Tunisians, where the Arab Spring had originated in December 2010: the socioeconomic crisis; high youth unemployment, especially among the more educated; and the monopolization of political power and economic resources in the hands of the elite.

The response of the Makhzen--as the palace is known--was swift: A vilification and harassment campaign against the leaders of the M20 Movement was accompanied by the cooptation of some of its main demands. On March 9, 2011, Muhammad VI announced constitutional revisions, which transferred some powers from the crown to parliament. That was followed by a popular referendum on July 1, 2011 to approve those reforms. The government then resigned, and in the November 2011 elections, the Islamist Justice and Development Party took 27 percent of the vote and was asked to form a government. The

international community praised the king's initiative, and the EU duly increased its aid to the country. There was ample talk of "l'exception marocaine," or "the Moroccan exception."⁴

Yet despite the enthusiasm of so many Western commentators and Muhammad VI's international image as a reformer, Islamism is an increasing force in the country--which is why a study of the country's Islamist panorama has become necessary. Following the classification made by Ukasha bin al-Mustafa, the Islamist movement in Morocco has been divided into three groups:

- 1) those who concentrate on preaching (*da'wa*);
- 2) the radical groups, which resort to violence and are rather marginal;
- 3) the political groups, which accept with more or less reservations the rules of the game.⁵

The focus here will be on the Organization for Justice and Charity, which belongs to the third group and is considered the largest Islamist organization in Morocco--and, possibly, the largest political movement in the country. However, first the article will look at the particularities of each group:

THE PREACHING MOVEMENTS

These groups concentrate on *da'wa* (preaching) and aspire to change society "from below," i.e., modifying people's attitudes and behaviors so that they follow the precepts of Islam. Its main representatives in Morocco are the Muslim Brothers' Society (Jama'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn) and the Society for Communication and Preaching (Jama'at al-Tabligh wa-l-Da'wa). Contrary to other countries, where it has adopted a more political stance, the Moroccan branch of the Muslim Brothers' Society concentrates on preaching and charity work, although many of its tenets have been adopted by the Organization for Justice and Charity (see below).

As for the Society for Communication and Preaching, it was established in the Indian

Sub-Continent in 1927, in an environment rarefied by tensions between Muslims and Hindus and between both groups and Christian evangelists. Its first Moroccan branch was established in 1964. The organization concentrates on the spiritual and behavioral education of Muslims. Its members take as their model Muhammad, imitating him in his actions, his words, and even the smallest details, such as the way he ate, slept, walked, or dressed. It prefers to stay away from the political process, which it considers illegitimate.

THE RADICALS WHO RESORT TO VIOLENCE

During the 1970s and the 1980s, the Moroccan state turned a blind eye to the surge of Islamism in order to undermine the left. In addition, Morocco is a relatively poor country that suffers from periodical economic crises, and thus welcomes the support of countries like Saudi Arabia, which is keen to export its intolerant branch of Sunni Islam. Furthermore, events like the “jihad” in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and later Afghanistan and Iraq, which attracted *mujahidin* (Islamist fighters) from numerous Muslim countries, contributed to radicalize a part of the Moroccan youth.

The first Islamist movement that used violence as a political weapon in Morocco was Islamic Youth (al-Shabiba al-Islamiyya), which was active in the 1970s and 1980s. This organization directed its violence mainly against the secularists and the left. For that reason, it was tolerated--some say, encouraged--by the Makhzen. Yet a sizeable number of its members eventually realized that their strategy was not leading anywhere and went on to establish the more moderate Justice and Development Party.

However, the Western response to the events of September 11 was perceived as an attack on Islam, leading to the creation of the groups ideologically close to al-Qa’ida, which perpetrated the May 2003 and March 2007 terrorist attacks in Morocco’s economic capital, Casablanca. Many advocates of this movement come from the slums; the radical

Islamists have been able to reach the poorest or the poor by offering them an ideological compass and proposing them literacy courses, social welfare, even marriages.

THE POLITICALLY-ORIENTED GROUPS

In this regard, the main players among these groups are the Justice and Development Party (Hizb al-Adala wa-l-Tanmiya)--which became the ruling party after the November 2011 elections--and the Organization for Justice and Charity (Jama’at al-Adal wa-l-Ihsan), which has not been legalized but operates quite openly. Both are characterized by seeking the Islamization of society “from above,” i.e., by conquering power and changing any legislation contrary to Islamic law or *Shari’a*--although neither neglect the education of society “from below.”

THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY

This party appeared in 1981 as the initiative of a group of members of Islamic Youth who decided to forsake violence. It underwent a number of changes in name and organization and merged with other groupings until it adopted its present name in 1996. The party was born with an aspiration to rule the country, but it also has what could be considered a preaching division: the Movement for Monotheism and Reform (Harakat al-tawhid wa-l-islah).

Ideologically, the Justice and Development Party considers Moroccan society as Muslim--as opposed to the radical Islamists, for whom the members of any society not ruled by God’s law cannot be considered Muslims. The party criticizes certain practices like the sacralization of Sufi “saints” or the resort to divination and the neglect of tenets of Islam such as prayer or fast, but it claims that those “problems” can be dealt with peacefully and gradually.

The Justice and Development Party first entered parliament after the 1997 elections, in a vote marked by abstention; it obtained nine

seats. It was more successful in 2002, when it obtained 42 seats, which, according to Santucci, can be attributed to “real social grassroots, an exemplary internal discipline and a very strong ideological empathy with the expectations of the electorate,” together with “a discourse which had more of virtuous and moralizing than of strictly religious, and particularly receptive to the need for ‘justice and development’ of the enlightened popular urban classes.”⁶

The party benefited greatly from the 20M Movement and more than doubled its votes in the 2011 elections, to over a quarter of the total or 107 MPs (of which only 4 are women). Abdelilah Benkirane was appointed prime minister and invited to form a government. Its policies have been those expected of a “moderate” Islamist party--which, to a great extent, reflects the mentality of Moroccan society, still rather traditional and patriarchal in nature. For instance, it opposed the 2004 king-sponsored Family Code.

THE ORGANIZATION FOR JUSTICE AND CHARITY

Without a doubt the largest Islamic organization in Morocco, with thousands of members, the Organization for Justice and Charity was set up and led by the controversial but revered Shaykh Abdessalam Yassine until his death in November 2012. In fact, Shaykh Yassine was already well known before setting up any organization.

In 1974, Yassine published his satirical epistle *al-Islam aw al-Tawfan* (Islam or the Deluge), an open letter to Hassan II. In it, he accused the monarch of being a tyrant and proposed a political system with no parties but a council, elected the “Islamic way” and advised by ulama, who would be both “partners” and a “supervisors” in the king’s task. He also accused the monarch of illegitimately appropriating himself of Morocco’s wealth and demanded social justice. Furthermore, he refused him the title of “Commander of the Faithful”; instead, he

addressed him as “grandson of the prophet of God.”⁷

The famous epistle led to Yassine’s arrest without trial for three and a half years, followed by his confinement to a psychiatric hospital. After his release, he became the preacher of a mosque in his city of birth, Salé, and followers started to gather around him. His activities led to his imprisonment for two years in 1983, and in 1989, he was put under house arrest until the year 2000. Since the 1980s and until his death, the shaykh tried to form a legal organization on several occasions, but his successive initiatives were turned down.

The Organization of Justice and Charity, set up in 1987, was the last of those attempts. Banned by the Moroccan authorities in 1990, “there are now newspapers devoted to disfigure the image of Abdessalam Yassine,”⁸ which give us an idea of the notoriety he has reached. Oddly enough, his death only made front-page news in two dailies: *al-Sabah* and *al-Masa*. Similarly, news of his passing was nearly absent from Moroccan state-owned television, only mentioned as a footnote in the second channel’s news. Strange for an event that attracted tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of people to Rabat from all over Morocco and abroad and was surrounded by a heavy security apparatus.

Yassine’s organization preaches an Islam that combines the conservative Maliki school of Islam typical of Morocco with Sufi mysticism. It calls for a return to “true” Islam; the terms “justice” and “spirituality” were adopted from the Koran (90:16): “God advocates *justice, charity*, and regarding the relatives [emphasis added].” It is critical of the Moroccan regime for its allegedly un-Islamic compromises with modernity. Although this article has classified it as political, because it aims at reaching power, it also pays great attention to the behavior of their members, who are expected to become models of conduct.

Yassine was very influenced by the Muslim Brothers’ Society, especially its founder, Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949), and by its main ideologue, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). Following

al-Banna, the shaykh maintained that Islam enters into all the questions of daily life--social, economic, political, and cultural.⁹ Like Qutb, he considered that there only exist two forms of government: that ruled by the Koran and that ruled by any other authority--including democracy, in which sovereignty resides in the people and not God. From this perspective, the Moroccan monarchy is yet another system not ruled by the Koran and, therefore, illegitimate.

However, Yassine revised the concept of *Jahiliyya* (ignorance of God), which Qutb had used to refer to any society that does not submit to God’s law. The shaykh argued that Moroccan society was not “ignorant” (*jahili*) but it had been “infatuated” (*maftun*).¹⁰ Furthermore, he insisted that its reform was possible through education and gentleness. Instead of violence, he advocated *qawma*, i.e., revolt, which would constitute a form of defiance and civil disobedience.¹¹

The other important referent for Yassine was Sufism. According to the shaykh, the divorce between jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Sufism (*tasawwuf*) was a disaster for Muslims, since “the split in the sciences of the Sharia and its discarding of the unseen and the faith is a fundamental cause of Muslim decadence.”¹² In fact, he adopted the Sufi title of *murshid* (spiritual guide) and fed some fabulous ideas surrounding his persona, such as that his soul could travel anywhere while his body remained in one place.

In addition, Yassine emphasized the importance of the switch from the period of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs (the four Companions of Muhammad who succeeded him) to the instauration of the Umayyad dynasty in the seventh century. This led to the transition from what he called the “true history” (*tarikh al-haqq*) to the “period of infighting” (*zaman al-fitna*), with the instauration of hereditary government.¹³

On the other hand, by taking seriously the social justice dimension of Islam, which he considered neglected by other Islamists, Yassine was hoping to pull the rug from under the feet of the left. In his view, the difference was that while the Left looks to agitate the

wretched so that they arise against the arrogant through the concept of class struggle, his organization looks for solidarity, cohesion, and collaboration through the concept of charity (*ihsan*).¹⁴

The organization is particularly strong not only in “regular” Islamist bastions such as the universities, but also in rural areas, which have not been traditionally the target of Islamist propaganda. Just like the Muslim Brothers’ Society, it has also often been accused of pretending to become a “state within the state” in its country of origin, Egypt, so Yassine’s movement has tried to infiltrate the social and political institutions of the state to increase its influence.

Yassine’s organization complements its planned Islamization “from above” with preaching efforts “from below,” through methods such as social work, books, CDs, and the internet. According to its leaders, its funding comes mostly from the donations given by their members and sympathizers, including Moroccans living abroad, although the presence of oil money also seems to be strong.

Finally, and like Hasan al-Banna, Yassine put great emphasis on obedience (*taha*), and his organization was molded as a pyramidal structure with the murshid--i.e., Yassine himself--on top.¹⁵ Although it has a consultative body, the Shura Council, the decisions of the murshid prevailed if a vote did not reach two-thirds of the total. In fact, the centrality of Yassine’s charismatic personality led to questions about the continuance of the Organization of Justice and Charity after his death.¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS

The “Moroccan exception” has been attributed to the intimate relationship between Islam and the monarchy, to the unifying role of the king as both political arbiter and Commander of the Faithful, and to Muhammad VI’s own reformist style. However, less self-congratulatory commentators also remarked that the civil war in neighboring Algeria in the 1990s and the

path taken by the Arab Spring in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, or Syria had persuaded most Moroccans that “better the evil you know...”¹⁷

Yet the country continues to have important problems to tackle, the most pressing of which is unemployment. According to official figures, it reaches almost 9 percent of the working force but it increases dramatically to about 30 percent for people under 35. Partly as a result, 15 percent of Moroccans live under the poverty line; and the government has to provide both economic growth *and* political empowerment.

On the first front, the country secured a \$1.5 billion in December 2012. However, this could prove a gamble if the money is not enough or not properly canalized, and turns the country into a prisoner of debt. It already happened in the 1980s, when loans that could not be repaid brought in the international financing institutions and their structural adjustment programs, which were behind much of the urban unrest witnessed in the country during that decade.

As for political empowerment, the measures taken so far seem inadequate. Although in Morocco there are political parties, elections, and a parliament, questioning the monarchy or religion continues to be out of the frame of accepted political discourse. Furthermore, the king remains head of the Council of Ministers, the Supreme Security Council, and the Ulama Council, as well as controlling security and intelligence, and his approach to government is definitely hands-on.

On the other hand, the Makhzen’s (the governing authority around the king in Morocco) power to deal with the ongoing Islamization of the country seems limited. As Chems rightfully points out, although Muhammad VI has tried some shy, reassuring reforms to please the West, those reforms do not reflect the prevailing ambience in Moroccan society.¹⁸ Furthermore, the king is unwilling to guarantee his subjects such basic rights as religious freedom.

Systematic is the reaction to the setting-up of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Morocco,

which represents Moroccans who demand freedom of conscience. It was rapidly followed by a *fatwa* (religious edict) by the Supreme Council of Ulama--which happens to be headed by the king himself--ratifying the Shari’a ruling according to which any Muslim who abandons Islam should be hanged.¹⁹ Moroccan activists fear that even if the state does not take any measures against them to protect its international image, there are plenty of fanaticized individuals willing to take fatwas into their own hands.²⁰

To sum up, the official rhetoric about an “exception marocaine” is not a reflection of the people’s unflinching support for the monarchy, as the regime would have one believe. Rather, it is the combination of the repression and marginalization of dissent, the cooptation of the more manageable sectors of the opposition, and the reaffirmation of an official narrative according to which the monarchy is an integral part of Moroccan identity--all that, combined with popular fears that a revolution would lead to a descent into chaos. In the meantime, Islamization--both “from above” and “from below”--continues.

**Ana Belén Soage holds a European Doctorate in Middle Eastern Studies.*

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NOTES

¹ Muhammad al-Saakit, “*Al-hiwar al-mu'attal*” [The Pending Conversation], in *al-Sabah*, October 15/16, 2012, p. 5.

² The most glaring example is Egypt, where there has even been a feature film, *678*, denouncing the phenomenon.

³ James Bell et al., “The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society,” *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/Muslim/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society.aspx> (accessed May 8, 2013).

⁴ There even was a collective book published under that title in 2013, directed by French authors Charles Saint-Pro and Frédéric Rouvillois and with both French and Moroccan collaborators.

⁵ Ukasha bin al-Mustafa, *al-Islamiyyun fi-l-Maghrib* [Islamists in Morocco] (Casablanca: Dar Tuqbal li-l-Nashr, 2008). There are other classifications. For instance, Zeghal disregards the first group identified by bin al-Mustafa and prefers to talk of a “legalist” political Islam, represented by Hizb al-Adala wa-l-Tanmiya; the mystic-rebellious Islamism of al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan; and a radical Salafi branch with links to international networks and support in the Casablanca slums. See Haoues Seniguer, “Zeghal, Malika, *Les islamistes marocains, le défi de la monarchie*,” Paris, *La Découverte*, “Cahiers libres” 2005, pp. 262-65. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 119-120 (November 2007), <http://remmm.revues.org/4041> (accessed May 8, 2013).

⁶ Jean-Claude Santucci, “*Le multipartisme marocain entre les contraintes d’un ‘pluralisme contrôlé’ et les dilemmes d’un ‘pluripartisme autoritaire’*” [The Multiparty System in Morocco: Between the Limitations of a ‘Controlled Pluralism’ and the Dilemmas of an ‘Authoritarian Multipartism’], *Las partis politiques dans les pays arabes*, 111-112, Tome 2, Le Maghreb, pp. 63-118 (March 2006), p. 38, <http://remmm.revues.org/2864> accessed on February 8, 2013).

⁷ See Abdessalam Yassine’s *al-Islam aw al-tawfan*, http://www.yassine.net/ar/download/Islam_aw_Toufan.pdf (accessed May 6, 2013).

⁸ Bin al-Mustafa, *al-Islamiyyun fi-l-Maghrib*, p. 38.

⁹ For more on this totalitarian conception of Islam, see Ana Belen Soage, “Hasan al-Banna or the Politicisation of Islam,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 21-42.

¹⁰ For more on Sayyid Qutb’s concept of *Jahiliya*, see William E. Shepard, “Sayyid Qutb’s Doctrine of *Jahiliyya*,” *International*

Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2003), pp. 521-545.

¹¹ Chakir Arslan contends that *qawma* was, in reality, one of the shaykh’s visions, predicted for 2006 but which failed to materialize. See Chakir Arslan, “Le mort d’un gourou: ‘Après moi, le deluge,’” [The Death of a Guru: “After me, the deluge”], *Le Temps*, Vol. 169, (December 21/27, 2002), pp. 18-19.

¹² Al-Kanburi, Idris, “*al-Qur’an wa-l-Sultan. Al-tarikh wa-jadaliyyat al-tafkik wa-l-tarkib fi fikr Abd al-Salam Yasin*” [The Koran and the Sultan: History and the Dialectic of Division and Assemblage in the Thought of Abdessalam Yassine], in *al-Masa*, October 15/16, 2012, p. 17.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bin al-Mustafa, *al-Islamiyyun fi-l-Maghrib*, p. 73.

¹⁵ The term *murshid* comes from Sufism and refers to the spiritual guide of a Sufi order.

¹⁶ In fact, much of the newspapers’ coverage of the Yassine’s death was devoted to the question of his succession. In *al-Masa*’s report on his burial, one of the shaykh’s own followers acknowledged the fight ahead to retain the organization’s strength. Similar doubts were expressed by journalists such as Isma’il Ruhi and Abd al-Allah al-Rami, also in *al-Masa*, Zayn al-Din in *Al-Sabah*, and Chakir Arslane in the weekly *Le Temps*. The latter, which devoted its front page to the shaykh, went as far saying that “his legacy will remain one of a personality cult tinted with a provocative Messianism.”

¹⁷ For examples of the first discourse, which follows the official line, see the issue of the weekly *La Vérité* dedicated to the M20 Movement two years after the events (No. 518, February 15/21, 2013), especially Bouchra Lahbabi’s “L’exception et le modèle” [The Exception and the Model] (p. 7), Abdelhafid El Filali El Mdaghri’s “Effilochage” [Fraying] (p. 9), and Abdessalam Mansouri’s “Pourquoi le Mouvement a fait plouf” [Why Did the [20M] Movement Plop?] (pp. 16-18). For an example of a more critical stance, see Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Mohamed Jekhllaly’s study “La

dynamique protestataire au Maroc” [The Dynamics of Protest in Morocco], *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 62, No. 5/6 (2012), pp. 867-94.

¹⁸ Youssef Chems, “Nadia Yassine, une figure emblématique du Maroc. La Marocaine qui ébranle le Royaume” [Nadia Yassine, an Emblematic Figure in Morocco: The Moroccan Woman Who Shook the Kingdom], *Shafir News*, November 18, 2005, http://www.saphirnews.com/Nadia-Yassine-une-figure-emblematisque-du-Maroc_a1581.html (accessed February 3, 2013).

¹⁹ “*Al-majlis al-ilmi yatamassak bi-fatwa muthira. Tatbiq hadd qatl al-muslim alladhi yughayr aqidatah,*” <http://insafpress.com/society/104-news-society/11011-2013-04-16-10-25-30.html> (accessed April 21, 2013). This is in accordance to all four schools of Sunni Islam; but contrary to the other three schools, the Malekite rite, predominant in Morocco, signals that even if the apostate repents, (s)he should not be forgiven and should be executed anyway.

²⁰ According to the author’s conversations with Moroccan activists who prefer to remain anonymous. A famous precedent is the case of Egyptian author Farag Foda, who was assassinated by radical Islamists after al-Azhar issued a fatwa against him. For more information, see Ana Belen Soage, “Faraj Fawda, or the Cost of Freedom of Expression,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 2007), <http://www.gloria-center.org/2007/06/soage-2007-06-03/>, pp. 26-33.