Defiant they stand, six sleekly dressed women in black pantsuits and short skirts, with lamps in the place of heads. The cover of a glossy Moroccan women’s magazine is intriguing for anyone unaware of the ongoing conflict between Morocco’s Islamist prime minister and a sector of his female constituents. Summing up the struggle, the legend reads in French: “Women Lamps? No
The lamp controversy symbolizes the peaceful but intense movement taking place in this ancient tradition-bound kingdom. Moroccan women, tired of being patronized by a dominant masculine society, are lashing back. Their immediate target is the congenial Islamist Prime Minister Abdelillah Benkirane, suspected by many feminists of harboring a not-so-secret agenda to roll back women’s hard-earned advances. The crisis came to a head last June, when Benkirane, speaking in parliament, denounced the model of European working women, “who don’t even find time to get married, to be mothers or to educate their children.” But what stirred feminine wrath was the Islamist leader’s condescending flattery: “The lights in Moroccan homes went out when women left the hearth to work outside.”

“Scandal! Degrading! Humiliating!” women protested on Facebook and Twitter, in the Moroccan media, and in front of parliament. No way would the Islamist-led government take away their rights. Ten human rights and women’s associations announced plans to take the prime minister to court for failing to apologize for his speech, considered “prejudicial against women.”

It is difficult for the outsider to understand the level of anger of Moroccan women over what appeared to be simply an ill-conceived gesture by the moderate Islamist leader to ingratiate himself with his conservative base. After all, compared to the rest of North Africa and the Middle East these days, Morocco appears to be an oasis of calm and progress. And women, who had lived under one of the most retrogressive Family Codes, have now gained a progressive legal status which is the envy of much of the Muslim world.

Morocco largely escaped the revolutionary fever of the Arab Spring which has inflamed the region since 2011. Like Tunisia, Moroccan youths, human rights activists, and left-wing and Islamic militants alike took to social media and the streets to protest the lack of jobs, poor social services, and income disparities. The Moroccan protesters denounced the ineffectual political parties, both left and right—but not the inviolable Palace. Moving swiftly, King Mohammed VI skillfully engineered a balanced solution to quell the unrest. There was a referendum on a new “democratic” constitution, with something for everyone: more powers for the government and legislature, the promise of gender parity and an independent judiciary. Yet the king, who is both chief of state and commander of the faithful, retained his broad powers.

Furthermore, election results were no longer skewed. When the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won parliamentary elections in November 2011, the king duly called on its leader to form a coalition government. The Palace has learned a hard lesson from neighboring Algeria, whose military had barred a popularly elected Islamist party from power, ushering in a decade of violence from which the country has not completely recovered. Morocco, on the other hand, has avoided the political turbulence shaking the Arab world with its marriage of convenience between King Mohammed VI and the moderate Islamist-led government. The kingdom has also gained a convenient scapegoat when things go wrong.

A Price to Pay for Stability

Bassima Hakkaoui, Morocco’s minister of solidarity, women, family and social development, and unproclaimed leader of the Islamist feminists.  

( PHOTO M. HOWE)