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The National Press Club **Human Rights and Political Reform in Morocco**

529 14th St N.W., Lisagor Room, 13th FL
Friday, June 6, 2008, 9:30 am

The National Press Club invited **Dr. Ahmed Herzenni**, the President of the Advisory Council on Human Rights, and **Fatiha Layadi**, journalist and Independent party member of the Moroccan parliament, to discuss how the establishment of Morocco's truth and reconciliation commission has strengthened the country's civil and political institutions. The event was moderated by **Jane Arraf**, former CNN Baghdad Bureau Chief and introductions were made by American Moroccan Institute's President **Mokhtar Ghambou**.

Mokhtar Ghambou began the event by noting that "Morocco is not the perfect example of democracy, yet it remains **an inspiring model of human rights and democratic reform** in the region." He introduced the speakers as having profoundly shaped the Moroccan political landscape.

Jane Arraf began her moderation of events asking Layadi to address the current status of women's reform in Morocco. Layadi was optimistic that **while it remains difficult for women in political, the conditions are rapidly changing**. She noted that 34 women have been elected to the Upper House of Parliament and the success of the 2004 Family Code that has changed women's reality, making women equal to men. She expressed hope that more women will be elected to Parliament in the upcoming 2009 election.

Arraf asked Herzenni to address balancing the struggle for human rights against the backdrop of increase security concerns. The U.S. is recently becoming concerned that North Africa may be fertile for al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. While noting that this conflict poses a serious dilemma, Herzenni was confident that **Morocco has made significant progress to balance security needs against due process and liberty**. For example, Herzenni compared Morocco's reaction in 2003 to attacks in Casablanca to the recent arrest of a Moroccan-Belgium network of terrorists. In 2003, 3000 people were arrested immediately following the attacks, many of whom were thought to not have any connection to the event. However, recently the government has responded much more moderately. "We have seen over the past 4 years that the conduct of the authorities has dramatically changed. **We can now attest that the 'Rule of Law' is a reality in Morocco.**"

Herzenni stated that the Council's position is that the fight against terrorism "cannot be used to disobey the rule of law," though this does not absolutely exclude some violations. We try to minimize this as much as possible.

Herzenni was asked about the relationship of Advisory Council on Human Rights to the Moroccan government. Herzenni assured the audience that although it was created by the state, the **Council acts independently from the government** and has been found as such by various international organizations. Herzenni stated that he had never been given any directive to either do or not do something.

When asked about whether the speakers had a chance to meet with any Congressmen and whether any such meetings discussed the status of human rights, both speakers stated that they had meet with Congressional staffers, but did not specify for which Congressmen. Layadi stated that “as part of the Arab world, as part of the Muslim world, we have to explain things a lot of things because **the West uses so many clichés in understanding women’s rights.**”

Both speakers were asked to discuss whether Morocco sees itself as a model of reform and moderation for the rest of the Arab world and whether the Arab world turns to them as such a model.

Herzenni **strongly disapproved of labeling Morocco as a model for other countries.** “We believe that when it comes to human rights and the transition to democracy, everything depends on the specific climate in each country. We are extremely proud of our experience in Morocco, after decades of totalitarianism, we have moved closer to democracy, but we are not tempted at all to market of our experience. If someone asks us to help and explain our experience, we will do it happily, as we have with our colleagues in Mauritania, Bahrain, and Yemen, but **we don’t present ourselves as *the* model.**”

Herzenni was asked about what cultural factors made reform possible in Morocco as compared to other Muslim countries. Herzenni **strongly disagreed that cultural factors either encourage or impede democratic reform.** “Cultural factors are not determinative; Political factors are much more important.” Herzenni stated that democratic **reform became possible in Morocco once the ruling government realized that they could not sustain the climate of confrontation and once the main opposition party resolved itself to only use democratic strategies** instead of violence. “Everything is possible when the rulers and the opposition groups realize that they should both choose cooperation and compromise rather than confrontation.” Herzenni also suggested that democratic reform was delayed by the economic crisis of the late 1970s

Both speakers were asked to offer advice to human rights activists in countries that do not have the support of the government. Herzenni recommended that reformists first **advocate for some sort of representational government.** He suggested that reformers **act on even the smallest opportunities for change** as long as they continually build on it. Layadi stated that “you can do nothing if you don’t have passion for it.”