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# Moroccan King Opens Door for Change

By SOUAD MEKHENNET APRIL 27, 2011

TANGIER — Mohamad Fizazi is emblematic of a problem facing the king of Morocco: How much, in these days of tumult across the Arab world, should the monarch heed men like him?

Mr. Fizazi, by his own admission, once preached jihad. That was before a day he says he will not forget: May 28, 2003.

Twelve days earlier, 12 suicide bombers had killed 33 other people in bombing attacks on a Spanish restaurant, a hotel, a Jewish community center and cemetery in Casablanca. Thousands were arrested and jailed in the crackdown that followed.

Mr. Fazizi said men in plainclothes stopped him outside the mosque where he was then imam. “I was gone for several days. My family had no idea about where I was,” he said in an interview in his home in Tangier. He was tried for terrorism and jailed for 30 years.

But on April 14, he was suddenly released, part of a move by King Mohammed VI to pardon or reduce the sentences of 190, mainly Salafi jihadist, prisoners — roughly one in 10 of the 2,000 or so people tried, sentenced and jailed after the Casablanca bombings.

While Morocco has not faced mass protests like those in Egypt or Tunisia,

and there is no united call for the leader — the king — to quit, demonstrations have called for change. And the king has responded, with the April release and by pledging in March to grant more religious freedom and more transparent justice. A commission is supposed to report in June on changing the Constitution, with a referendum to follow.

How will Salafi jihadists, the main targets of the 2003 post-bombing detentions and trials, fit into this picture? Some of them advocate war against the Western presence in the Muslim world and have supported attacks in the West and the overthrow of rulers in Muslim countries.

To Arab and Western intelligence services, Mr. Fizazi was known as an important preacher in the movement. He had, they say, supported attacks on the West and its allies, and preached in Al Quds Mosque in Hamburg, with planners and pilots of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks listening.

“I preached in that mosque but I never met any of these people in private, and I had certainly no knowledge about their plans,” said Mr. Fizazi, 63.

Now, he said, he counsels moderation and has accepted democratic practices like elections that he once spurned.

But he wants the king to do more. He and four others recently released, plus five still interned prisoners, have joined human rights advocates in demanding a fresh inquiry into the May 2003 bombing and subsequent interrogations and jailings, as well as investigation of three top officials, two of them close advisers to the king.

“I had nothing to do with these attacks and there are many others in prison for this who don’t either,” Mr. Fizazi said of the Casablanca bombings.

“We want the decision makers from 2003 to be questioned,” said Muhammad Hakiki, a leftist political prisoner under the late King Hassan II who now heads Alkarama, a human rights organization in Morocco. “The king has to show now that he is not only talking but that he will also act,” he added.

The release of political prisoners is also the priority for the 20th February Movement, which has spearheaded some of the largest protests, said its

spokesman, Montasser Drissi, a 19-year-old student.

The trio they want investigated includes two friends of the king, Fouad Ali Himma and Mounir el Majidi. The third, General Hamidou Laanigri, is former head of the internal Moroccan intelligence service known as the D.S.T.

Mr. Himma, who went to school with the king, was in 2003 the state secretary of the interior, responsible for the D.S.T. General Laanigri was its chief.

Mr. Himma left his position in August 2008 to found the Authenticity and Modernity Party, generally regarded as a political tool for the monarchy.

Moroccan human rights groups believe that Mr. Himma and the general were responsible for the torture and wrongful arrest of thousands.

Eric Goldstein, deputy director for Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch, said he had no specific information about either man's role. He did assert, however, that the United States and Morocco cooperated in renditions, flying suspects from Afghanistan or Pakistan to Morocco for interrogation by the C.I.A. Morocco has always denied any such role.

Mr. Hakiki, the former prisoner and human rights activist, said Mr. Majidi should be investigated for what he called "corruption in business." Protesters have carried pictures of Mr. Himma and Mr. Majidi, demanding that they "get out."

"The king is good, but some people around him are evil," said Omar al Hamdouni, who was imprisoned on terrorism charges and has now been pardoned.

"The first one who started with positive changes in the Arab world was the Moroccan king," Mr. Fizazi said. "I think the king has realized that things went wrong here and the biggest evidence for it is that he has freed us."

Western security services may have a different view.

"Nothing would be worse and more dangerous" than freed Salafi jihadists

“without jobs and perspective, because then they might fall back to what they preached before,” a European intelligence official said on condition of anonymity. “Fizazi used to inspire young men to take actions against any countries which participated in the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq.”

This official said he was surprised in July 2009 when Mr. Fizazi published letters opposing suicide attacks and attacks in Western countries. “We first thought, this must be fake, but it became clear that it wasn’t,” he said.

In the interview, Mr. Fizazi said he had written the letters of his own free will. “Today I am against the killing of innocent people, it is not right to have attacks in any Western countries.”

After his announcement, Mr. Fizazi said, he got death threats.

Asked about a son-in-law, Naman Meziche, who used to live in Hamburg and who, according to German and Pakistani intelligence officials, traveled in March 2009 to the tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Mr. Fazizi demurred. “I had no idea about this, my son-in-law did not ask me, nor do we know where he is,” he said.

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