



RABAT: A Moroccan man looks at a computer screen displaying pictures of King Mohammed VI of Morocco. — AFP

MOROCCO'S SELFIE KING CAUSES AN ONLINE STIR

A FAR CRY FROM THE TRADITIONAL POMP

RABAT: Smiling and relaxed, Morocco's King Mohammed VI wears a psychedelic T-shirt and jeans as he poses with an admirer in Paris. It's a far cry from the traditional pomp of Morocco's royal court, but pictures of the king casually posing with his subjects are doing the rounds on social media. One shot, shared on Facebook on September 1, received 19,000 "likes" in a week.

"We were on a family shopping trip on the Champs Elysees when I saw the king in a 4x4," wrote "Momo", an anonymous Facebook user who appears in the picture. "I called out emotionally-'Sidna' (your majesty). He was kind enough to stop, come and say hello and take my little girl in his arms for a photo." In other pictures posted on a dedicated Facebook page, the king talks with a fan in a Paris Saint-Germain football club cap. In another, an admirer in overalls kisses his shoulder in a sign of respect. There is no sign of a bodyguard in the photos, many of which are taken overseas and have the air of casual holiday snaps taken by friends.

'Communications policy'

The Moroccan royal family have no

official pages on the social networking site. But the photos posted on a popular unofficial Facebook page appear to be part of a carefully engineered strategy, said French historian Pierre Vermeren. "These images come from a well thought-out communications policy," he said. "There's a clear desire to show how close the king is to his people." The 53-year-old king's habit of posing with the public contrasts with his approach to the traditional media, which he keeps at arm's length.

It also marks him out from other heads of state, particularly in the Arab world, who stay behind imposing security barriers. Judging by comments on social media, it is a strategy that is working with Moroccans—apart from a few criticisms of the cost of his clothes. "The most beautiful picture with the children, it's a sign of humility and love for the new generation... best king in the world," Jomana Naji wrote in one comment. Like the photo of "Momo", many of the shots-taken during the king's private trips—are posted on a Facebook page, "Roi du Maroc: Mohammed 6".

'Opposite course'

The page, which has 3.5 million sub-

scribers, is administered from a town near the capital Rabat by Soufiane el-Bahri, a 25-year-old playboy with gelled hair and a broad smile. A well-known member of Morocco's super-elite, Bahri keeps his distance from the media. He did not respond to an AFP request via Facebook for comment. He administers three other unofficial pages of members of the ruling family, along with his own page full of pictures of himself.

Many in Morocco wonder how he obtains the photos and comments from the people posing in them—as well as the reaction from the royal court, habitually prickly when it comes to the king's private life. In a recent interview with CNN Arabic, Bahri said that while he "madly admires" the king and "works in coordination with his cabinet," he had never actually met the monarch. It was almost certain the palace approved the publication of the photos, said Vermeren. Many Moroccans remember the king's father and predecessor, Hassan II, who would never have allowed such photos, he said. "Hassan II sowed fear and was himself afraid of his people. Since he took the throne, his son has tried to take the opposite course." — AFP

TAJIKISTAN PRESIDENT SAYS HIS OPPONENTS PLANNED 'ISLAMIC STATE'

DUSHANBE: Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmon accused a jailed opposition group of attempting to build an "Islamic state" and triggering civil war in the secular country, in a speech shown on state TV yesterday. In the address marking the ex-Soviet country's 25th independence anniversary, Rakhmon blasted the "destructive plans" of an Islamic party recently banned as a "terrorist" group by the government. "Malicious forces and misguided people working to the plans and instructions of their foreign masters...planned to build an Islamic state, and dragged Tajikistan into the vortex of a fratricidal war," Rakhmon said.

The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan which styled itself as moderate was declared a "terrorist" group following lethal political violence in the country last year. Tajikistan in August said it had jailed 170 people over a purported mutiny led by a deputy defense minister last September that the government said the IRPT organized. At least 26 people died in the fighting that ensued, according to the country's interior ministry. Earlier this month Rakhmon said the civil war that raged from 1992 to 1997 and cost tens of thousands of lives "came from the mosques of that era...by the initiative of the IRPT." Ex-collective farm boss Rakhmon, who has been impoverished since 1994, has publicly stated his dislike of Islamic dress. Reports of police forcibly shaving believers' beards in the country of 8 million are widespread. The US, European Union and an array of rights groups have aired concerns about the imprisonment of a dozen members of the IRPT leadership. — AFP

HUNDREDS FLEE HONDURAS GANGS' KILLINGS, THREATS

SAN PEDRO SULA: Nelson fled Honduras for the United States to escape a murderous gang that was trying to force him to sell drugs. Just 23, he was deported back to his homeland, his 46-year-old mother Marina says. He was soon dead. They are two of countless ordinary victims of an extraordinary tragedy: the gang violence terrorizing Honduras, possibly the most dangerous country in the world. Poor families like theirs are fleeing home for their lives. Honduras's National Human Rights Commission says more than 74,000 people in this country of eight million moved or emigrated between 2004 and 2014.

Pistol in the mouth

A gang murdered Geraldina's three sons and now she fears for her daughter. "She saw when they killed her brother," Geraldina says. "They came into the house and put a pistol in her mouth to tell her not to talk." Like other witnesses of gang violence interviewed by AFP, she asked not to be identified by her full name. The Megalocos gang killed two of her sons, aged 19 and 22, for disobeying warnings not to wear the shirt of their football team Olimpia, Geraldina said. The third, aged 23, was killed because he refused to join the gang.

The head of the country's human rights commission, Roberto Herrera, said that last year more than 16,000 Hondurans applied to the commission to be relocated abroad. That was a 99 percent increase from the previous year, he added. They flee their home neighborhoods, driven out by murders, kidnappings, extortion, assaults and threats. Many of them seek to move to Costa Rica or Canada, Herrera says. Many others don't wait, but flee straight to the United States—as Geraldina's daughter did. She, too, was deported back to Honduras. Now she and her mother live in a neighborhood far away from the gang.

'Shooting every day'

Honduras has one of the highest homicide rates in the world: more than six times the world average, according to the World Health Organization. Officials blame gangs and drug-traffickers. Groups such as the Salvatrucha Gang and District 18 rule the poor outskirts of Honduras's main cities. Before it was torn apart by the murders, Geraldina's family lived in San Pedro Sula, Honduras's second-biggest city—and one of the world's most violent. "There is shooting every day. It goes for an hour or more," says one local woman there, Petronila. Young gang members cruise around in luxury vehicles toting guns. "A lot of weapons end up scattered in the street" after a battle, she says. The US government's development agency USAID runs "community-based efforts to prevent crime and gang activity" in Honduras. — AFP