

**MOROCCO AND AFRICA:
TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF REGIONAL COOPERATION
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INTRODUCTION

In January 2017 at the 28th African Union (AU) Summit held in Addis Ababa, King Mohammed VI made a historic speech which made headlines in numerous African newspapers. Addressing heads of African States, the Moroccan monarch announced that the return of Morocco to its African fold was an inevitable course given the historical ties and strong political and economic interests that have always united his country with the African continent. Amid the warm welcome of the majority of African member states, the king outlined his “vision of South-South cooperation” insisting that it was time for African political elites to recognize their strengths and potentials, and empower their own political, judicial and economic institutions to face the enduring challenges of development and political stability.

The galvanizing rhetoric of this speech had a particular resonance for both media commentators and political analysts as it marked a decisive policy shift in Afro-Moroccan relations and ended a long period of incoherence and misunderstanding after the admission of SADR as a member state into the defunct Organization of the African Unity (OAU) in 1984. For over three decades, successive Moroccan governments adopted the empty seat policy in various African organisms that recognized the Polisario Front and worked hard to build and maintain strong bilateral relations with a number of Francophone African states as an alternative strategy to the country’s formal exit from corporate African institutions.¹

Nevertheless, for many commentators this was only the beginning of a more intriguing phase in the tortuous history of the conflict over the Sahara. Despite the massive support for the re-admission of Morocco into the African Union (39 states for versus 9 against), it is not clear if the AU would be disposed or able to play any role in securing a solution to this conflict in the future. Morocco’s decision to regain its seat in various African committees and summits means that it will be in position to preemptively offset any measures that seek to undermine its sovereignty over the Sahara or curb its ambition to expand its economic interests in the continent. Moreover, Morocco’s determination to consolidate its position as a key player in African affairs, using its accumulated experience and strategic partnerships with the United States, the European Union and the Gulf States,

threatens to weaken further the base of solidarity with the Polisario Front within the AU. Zimbabwe's ousted president, Robert Mugabe, for instance, was outspoken in his rebuke of African leaders for their willingness to cede to Morocco's wish to rejoin the AU even though the conflict in the Sahara remains locked in stalemate.² In his speech, however, King Mohammed VI noted that Morocco had "absolutely no intention of causing division" and that it would instead "help bring about unity and progress."³

Observers familiar with Moroccan political affairs realize that foreign policy remains largely a reserved domain of the king who, in concert with his own advisors, not only defines the strategic vision and sets up the priorities, but also takes an active role in implementing such policies.⁴ In recent years, this proactive disposition has involved frequent and extended official visits to scores of countries including several that for decades had uneasy relations with Morocco. The cornerstone in the royal agenda as far as the African continent is concerned is building strong economic partnerships and enabling both the governmental and private sectors to invest in projects that have a clear structural impact on the national economies of African countries such as agriculture, energy, industry, tourism, telecommunication, banking, and Human Resources. As much as it seeks to establish solid and lasting frameworks of profitable cooperation, this economic orientation goes a long way toward consolidating political rapprochement and helps create a suitable environment for other forms of cooperation at the regional and international levels.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

The pragmatic, level-handed policies with their pronounced economic drift pursued by King Mohammed VI in Africa are an integral part of his political doctrine⁵ and constitute a rupture with the approach of his predecessor, King Hassan II for whom ideological affinities and political considerations took priority over concrete forms of economic cooperation. Since 1999, when Mohammed VI succeeded his father, economic growth has formed the staple of his domestic policy paving the way for slow but steady chain of reforms involving public administration, the legal system as well as the business environment. The transition from a repressive and centralized regime to a relatively open and liberal one contributed to shaping a new image of Morocco as a regional model in political and economic reforms. On the social plane, there were various initiatives taken by the king to restore public faith in the establishment. They include launching a process of national reconciliation aimed to redress the systematic abuses of human

rights in the past, the introduction of the National Human Development Initiative (INDH) intended to reduce the extreme levels of poverty in rural and underdeveloped urban areas, and the issuing of a new Family Code (*Mudawana*), which sought to provide holistic answers to longstanding conjugal and parental problems. In the aftermath of 2003 terrorist incident in Casablanca, the king, in his religious capacity as Commander of the Faithful (*Amir Al-Mu'minin*), undertook drastic reforms of the religious domain by empowering the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs and its various regional councils to fight radicalism and preach moderate and tolerant teachings of Islam. The social arenas, on which these reform policies were focused, in fact, are not particular to Morocco, and have always generated a great deal of controversy among contending forces in the Arab World.

Starting from 2011, the legacy of these unresolved social questions coupled with the exceeding tyranny of the Arab regimes provided the fuel for wide-scale popular protests. Nevertheless, the Arab Spring had far less disruptive effects on social and political stability in Morocco than in many neighboring countries. Inspired by the successes of Tunisian and Egyptian militants and the quick fall of their rulers, young Moroccan protesters alongside activists from various political organizations, united under the banner of what was to become 20th February Movement, took to the streets in a dozen cities and raised radical slogans demanding immediate political reforms and the end of institutionalized corruption. It was striking that slogans calling for the fall of regime raised in other countries had little echo or appeal among the demonstrators. Even amid the mounting tensions between security forces and angry militants, the figure of the king came out unscathed.⁶ Apart from the high esteem that the king enjoyed in the public opinion, it was also the political dynamism already initiated in the preceding decade, which assuaged the tensions and served as a buffer against destructive outcomes of the protests. It was true that the ongoing political process suffered from chronic dysfunction; the accomplishments were meager in comparison with the broad expectations of the public. Yet for many Moroccans the political establishment needed not so much dissolution as serious overhauling. Even the most radical voices felt that regime change was a risky and an open-ended venture.

In his televised speech three weeks after the youth movement descended to the streets, the king revealed his full commitment to heed public demands for serious constitutional reforms. Among many propositions, he pledged to "consolidate the rule of law and the institution-based State; expand the scope of collective and individual freedoms and guarantee their practice; promote all types of human rights – political, economic, social, and

cultural rights.⁷⁷ The swift reaction of Mohammed VI and his unequivocal proclamation to undertake serious democratic reforms explain why in subsequent weeks the protests gradually lost their momentum and why the numerous partisans of 20th February Movement dwindled after every march. The king's speech, revolutionary for some, another temporary gimmick to weather the storm for others, breathed a new energy in the humdrum political process. The committee appointed by the king to write the new constitution met and consulted for weeks with the political entities and civil society organizations across the board. Their final draft of the constitution was presented by the king in June 2011 and put to a national referendum two weeks later. While the hopes raised by the king's speech of March 2011 for a genuine democratization process have not yet been fully concretized, at least not in the swift way so many expected, public interest in domestic politics has never been as strong and sustained as it is today. One of the sobering lessons of the Arab Spring for the political elite in Morocco is that economic success must ultimately be measured by the wide and concrete impact it has on the social scale.

On the other hand, the relatively peaceful dynamics of the Moroccan Spring can be attributed partly to the structural reforms conducted by successive governments to boost and diversify national economy. Since the mid-1990s, Morocco had developed strong economic relations with Europe and benefited from financial support through various programs. In the ensuing two decades, Moroccan economy underwent profound readjustment to face the increasing domestic demand and face the fierce competition of world markets. Morocco signed a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the United States in 2004, which entered into force in January 2006 offering a new major outlet for Moroccan exports. In October 2008, Morocco concluded the Advanced Status agreement with the European Union enhancing the integration of Moroccan economy within the European structure. The liberalizing process of key sectors such as telecommunication, air transport, and energy coupled with Morocco's increasing attractiveness for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) had invigorating effects on the economy leading to reassuring annual growth rates despite the effects of the global economic crisis. Starting from 2008, the sectorial plans involving agriculture, industry, solar and wind energy, tourism, fishing industry, railway transport, logistics, roads, and mining formed the principal pillars of the national strategy for sustained development. These national programs were complemented by the creation of poles of regional development, which are inscribed in the broader project of regionalization and decentralization. The 2011 constitution offers general terms of how to implement advanced regionalization giving considerable

autonomy to regional and local administrative entities. At the heart of the regionalization program is the process of rehabilitation and empowerment of urban centers. In recent years, King Mohammed VI presided over several grand projects seeking the improvement of infrastructure and services in major cities in a step to win social approval and reinforce the tourism industry.

Among these projects, Tangier Med Port, one of the largest cargo ports in Africa, had a significant impact on the growth of national economy. Located at the crossroads of international trade and linked to the major Moroccan urban centers through railway and highway lines, it is the principal outlet for agricultural and industrial exports, particularly the expanding automotive industry. The rapid growth of Tangier Med Port and its strategic geographical location have attracted a constellation of technological industries that set up its plants in Morocco in recent years. The Launching of the 2014-2020 Industrial Acceleration Plan comes as a new measure to promote the country as a hub of industry enjoying not only proximity to the world markets and political stability, but also well-developed communication and logistical infrastructure.⁸

The ensemble of these economic and political reforms have not resolved structural problems of development, or reduced the disparities between various regions in Morocco, nor have they created enough opportunities to absorb rising demand for decent jobs notably among young graduates. Nevertheless, they have inspired enough confidence among the large public in the ability of the political class to continue the process of reform, and confront the lingering legacy of corruption, inefficiency and bureaucracy. In the broader context of the Arab World plunged into a cycle of violence and chaos, Morocco has in the eyes of international organizations fared well and was on its way to become an emerging state.

IN SEARCH OF AFRICAN MARKETS

The return of Morocco to the African Union may have benign political effects, enabling the country to consolidate its position in this large and influential organism, and enlist the support of its member states in issues of regional and global concern. Certainly, Morocco's initiatives to plead for the right of Africans for sustainable development opportunities and fair immigration policies, as well as its participation in the UN peacekeeping operations in several parts of Africa have received commendable attention from the international community. Moreover, under the auspices of African

solidarity, Morocco can pursue, even more rigorously, its goal of patching up its strained relations with a handful of African member states that have supported the Polisario Front, and swaying them to adopt a more accommodating political attitude. However, it was the profound recognition that the African continent holds enormous untapped resources and human capital that led the Moroccan political and economic elite to reverse the traditional reserved approach and invest heavily in the African space. The need to transcend the old economic paradigm constrained by its heavy reliance on government protectionism and dependency on the European market drove the Moroccan government to adopt a steady process of liberalization of its economy and the privatizations of key sectors. Given the failure of regional Arab organisms like the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Arab League (AL) to develop solid economic integration of their member states and create alternative markets, Morocco was compelled to explore new venues of economic cooperation with different and important partners such as the United States, India, China, Russia and Turkey. In an attempt to diversify and strengthen the bases of its national economy, and restructure the entire economic model, Morocco undertook a rigorous policy of rehabilitation of its key sectors through legislating liberal and transparent policies as well as investing capital and expertise to enhance international competitiveness. By 2014, Morocco posed as a creditable regional ally for its various partners in Europe and Asia boasting a thriving economy and political stability.

The genuine opportunities that African markets represented for Morocco's developing economy needed the political backup to set up the frameworks of cooperation, create bonds of trust, and above all remove the constraints that inhibit the flow of capital. Morocco had traditionally maintained strong political relations with several West African countries such as Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Gabon, and the Ivory Coast. Beside their economic and political aspects, these relations involve religious and spiritual dimensions, since the Maliki School of jurisprudence (*Madhab*) is the doctrine of Sunni Islam followed entirely or partly in these countries. Moreover, the existence of strong spiritual ties between influential brotherhoods in Morocco and some of these countries constitutes a powerful source of popular affection and esteem for Morocco and its monarch given his *Sharfian* descent. The religious component in Moroccan foreign policy particularly in this part of Africa has always functioned in favor of the overall political cooperation. Thanks to these stable and solid relations, Morocco's interests in Africa suffered little damage during the long period of its absence from the AU. More importantly, Morocco's efforts to rejoin the

AU received salutary backing from these traditional allies.

It was in March 2013 that the king began a series of official visits to a number of West African countries to give new momentum to growing economic relations. During this official tour, King Mohammed VI visited Senegal, the Ivory Coast, and Gabon and concluded several trade agreements involving transport, agriculture, fishing, tourism, mining, and healthcare sectors.⁹ When he visited Rabat in July 2013, Senegalese President, Macky Sall and the king supervised the signature of six agreements strengthening bilateral economic relations and collaboration between various government institutions in both countries.¹⁰ In September of the same year, the king attended the inauguration ceremony of the Malian President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and delivered a speech to confirm Morocco's commitment to support Mali's people and government through a process of reconciliation and reconstruction.¹¹ It was during this visit that an agreement was concluded enabling some 500 imams from Mali to be trained in Morocco over the ensuing years.¹²

During the period 2014-2016, the king accompanied by important delegations representing the government and the major operators in the private sector, made several official visits to Mali, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Gabon, Guinea, and Guinea Bissau. Along with his fellow head of African states, he presided over the signature of numerous agreements involving economic, cultural and scientific cooperation, and participated in the launch and the follow-up of major projects of infrastructure. These extended visits confirmed the engagement of Moroccan authorities to foster strategic economic partnerships with Sub-Saharan African countries. The active role played by the Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM) and its counterparts in these countries gave the bilateral cooperation a strong business impetus. In his speech, Mohammed VI observed that while "previously, diplomacy was at the service of the consolidation of political relations today, it is the economic dimension that prevails and is one of the fundamental diplomatic relations."¹³ Although until 2015, Sub-Saharan Africa represented a marginal trade partner with only 3.4% of the overall Moroccan trade compared to the European Union and MENA region,¹⁴ the volume of this trade has increased considerably over the last decade. The same tendency of growth has defined Moroccan trade relations with the African continent. Thus, according to the Moroccan Ministry of Economy, national trade exchanges with Africa "grew by an average of 11% annually over the period 2005- 2015, to nearly MAD 40 billion in 2015, which represents about 7% of Morocco's foreign trade compared with 5% in 2005."¹⁵

In terms of the flow of Moroccan capital into African markets, Morocco has consolidated its position as one of the major investors in Africa. Recently, the president of the African Development Bank saluted Morocco's commitment to invest in the continent noting that 85% of the country's total FDI goes to Africa.¹⁶ The figures stated by the African Investment Report 2017 indicated that besides being one of the major recipients of FDI in Africa, Morocco has expanded its own share of the African market reaching 5% (after China 39% and UAE 12%) which represented \$4.8bn worth of 17 projects. Among these projects, four were destined for Ivory Coast with an estimated capital of \$213 million.¹⁷

The salient feature of these projects is that they are part of a broader dynamic of close political and economic cooperation and are not merely profitable business transactions. The return to the African Union in 2017 makes a great deal of sense in the context of Morocco's firm desire to reposition itself as an important regional actor in the African continent. While preserving its strategic partnership with the EU and US, Morocco has sought to widen the range of its trade partners in an effort to reduce its dependence on Western markets and shield its economy from their tough trade legislations. Moreover, the chaos that has overcome Arab political landscape since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the social upheavals triggered by the Arab Spring events have further weakened the prospects of Arab regional economic integration. The fact that the king has consistently abstained from attending Arab League summits in person reflects his limited confidence in the ability of the Arab League to promote any form of pan-Arab solidarity and cooperation. Although Morocco continues to maintain excellent political relations with oil rich Gulf States, it has adopted a largely passive role in the current political imbroglios of the region.

By contrast, Morocco's full reintegration in the African space in early 2017 was an important political decision that provoked a lot of interest among the media and the large public. Besides the clear economic drives, Morocco was particularly keen on fortifying its position against the contingencies of international politics concerning the unresolved conflict in the Sahara and redeeming its image as a friendly nation enjoying a good reputation in its African entourage. These pursuits also dovetailed with the country's desire to increase its attractiveness as a platform for international investors using its strategic location, open economic policies, and business-friendly environment as incentives to gain more visibility in an increasingly competitive world.

The king's visits to Rwanda, Tanzania, Senegal, Ethiopia, Madagascar,

and Nigeria toward the end of 2016 were motivated by a combination of political and economic factors. As part of his campaign to gain support for the decision to rejoin the AU, the king's official visits to these countries helped invigorate bilateral relations and lay the foundations of long-term economic cooperation. Like the numerous deals signed with West African countries, the agreements concluded with these countries involved various economic sectors notably agriculture, industry, mining, energy, transport, logistics, renewable energies, construction, healthcare, and tourism. The most ambitious of these projects undertaken jointly by Morocco and Nigeria involves the building of a 5000 km long gas pipeline supplying several West African countries and Morocco with an estimated cost of \$20 billion. Despite the ecological fears the project has raised among regional environmental organizations,¹⁸ the estimated benefits are considerable. The gas pipeline, it is stated, "will promote the emergence of an integrated North-West African zone and allow the region to achieve energy independence, accelerate electrification projects in benefit of the populations and stimulate important economic and industrial activities."¹⁹ During an official meeting in Rabat in May 2017, Nigerian and Moroccan officials signed documents relating to the implementation of this giant project. Besides gas, cooperation between the two countries involved the development of the fertilizer industry in Nigeria. The OCP (Office Chérifien des Phosphates) Group and Fertilizer Producers and Suppliers Association of Nigeria (FEPSAN) agreed to collaborate in matters of expanding fertilizer production and distribution capacity in Nigeria to meet the rising demand of the local market.²⁰ The OCP Group, which had increased its exports to Africa by 70% in 2016, also launched two important projects in Ethiopia and Rwanda involving the construction of two fertilizer plants. It is expected that these plants will boost agricultural production and satisfy the needs for fertilizers suited for the crops and soil of these countries.²¹

Given the importance of the agricultural sector in African economies, the Moroccan government, deployed remarkable efforts to promote close cooperation in the field with its various partners in the African continent. During the COP22 conference held in Marrakech in 2016, attended by numerous African heads of state, Morocco proposed the initiative of "Adaptation of African Agriculture" (AAA) which provides a panoply of measures to minimize the nefarious effects of climatic change and draught over farming programs in Africa.²² In particular, the initiative seeks to enable farmers to better valorize and adapt their limited resources to the challenges posed by global warming.

CONCLUSION

Morocco's heavy investment in African markets will begin to yield its results only in the years ahead. The productive impact of Morocco's overtures will eventually consolidate its position as a key regional state. However, much depends on the ability of the Moroccan political establishment to continue to display dynamism and openness in its relation to its African partners. Beside its economic interests, Morocco's experience in fighting terrorism and its strong security and intelligence apparatuses can constitute solid foundations of bilateral and multilateral cooperation especially in an environment increasingly threatened by extremist religious and ethnic ideologies. The effects of climatic change and the immediate and long-term challenges that economic development pose to African nations constitute strong arenas of collective action. The return to the African Union paves the way for Morocco to contribute to and benefit from the enormous opportunities that the continent holds in terms of its natural resources and human capital. For Morocco to maintain its influence and promote its image as regional model of stability and growth, however, its elected governments need to address domestic difficulties involving gross economic disparities between various regions and empower the population politically and economically. In fact, in strengthening its political edifice through implementation of democratic measures and the promotion of fair and efficient governance, Morocco will not only be able to redress social and economic inequalities, but will also supply a pathway for its African partners to achieve stability and durable economic development. The important political reforms undertaken by the king following his accession in 1999 and the adoption of a new constitution expanding the scope of democratic practice are important steps on the path of democratization and can be inspiring for numerous countries still in the process of transition from totalitarian to elective government.

The enduring conflict in the Sahara remains a major handicap to Moroccan political and economic emergence. In spite of Morocco's efforts to reach a peaceful solution under the auspices of the United Nations, which included the proposal of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, deemed credible and serious by numerous states, there seems to be little hope for a speedy settlement acceptable by both parties. The specter of war is never far and threatens to plunge the entire region into turmoil. While the ultimate solution to this conflict will necessitate an *entente* between the principal states in the Maghreb, Morocco and Algeria, Moroccan authorities need to continue to improve the living conditions in the Sahara provinces and empower local Sahraoui population to contribute to the welfare of their

region. The greater role the Sahraoui population assume in the management of their administrative and economic affairs, the less chances the Polisario will have to market their separatist agenda. The readmission to the African Union will create further channels of communication for Moroccan officials to convince their African partners of their positive disposition to work for peace and stability in the Sahara and across the African continent.

NOTES

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