



# Progress and Missed Opportunities: Morocco Enters Its Third Decade Under King Mohammed VI

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On July 30, 1999, one week after succeeding his father, Morocco's King Mohammed VI sits in a horse-drawn carriage, on his way to preside for the first time over Muslim prayers at the Ahl Fes Mosque in Rabat. Source: Reuters

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Morocco's King Mohammed VI will celebrate 21 years on the throne in July 2020. Over the last two decades, the king has spearheaded positive civil and political reforms, as well as formidable foreign policy and infrastructural changes. Most recently, the regime took swift and effective measures to control the initial spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. Yet, deeply rooted socioeconomic and political challenges have fueled growing popular disillusionment with the regime and triggered numerous

strikes and protests in recent years. Two decades on, regret and missed opportunities are multiplying, as Moroccans look back on the reign of a monarch many had hoped would bring about deep political reform and eradicate social inequality.

This policy briefing closely evaluates the major achievements and challenges that came out of Morocco's first two decades under King Mohammed VI. First, it overviews the noteworthy foreign policy achievements, large-scale infrastructural developments, important civil reforms, and limited political transformation undertaken by the monarch. Second, it examines the lack of deep political reform and socioeconomic growth that continues to plague the kingdom. Finally, it contends that the regime should preemptively introduce genuine and targeted reforms in order to improve political and socioeconomic conditions and prevent popular discontent from boiling over into violence.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Promote genuine political change:** The Moroccan regime should bring about concrete political opening by minimizing interference in government affairs and by effectively dividing tasks between the monarchy and the government.
- **Reduce social inequality for vulnerable groups:** The regime should raise funds (by reforming the taxation system) to improve the living conditions of rural populations and to enhance education and welfare for vulnerable groups.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Arab Barometer found that 70 percent of Moroccans between the ages of 18 and 29 had thought about emigrating,<sup>2</sup> while 49 percent supported rapid political change on the domestic front—the latter percentage being the highest of all Arab countries polled.<sup>3</sup> Such figures—along with chronic protests, a countrywide boycott, critical chants and rap songs, and expressions of discontent on social media—point to an increasing sense of popular disillusionment with the regime. The growing frustration of a wide group of Moroccans comes at an interesting time in the country's political history. King Mohammed VI will celebrate 21 years on the throne on July 30, 2020—in the midst of a pandemic that has pushed the country into mandatory lockdown, left many without wages, and led to a reported rise in police violence.<sup>4</sup>

Under Mohammed VI, Morocco has undergone important political and economic reforms while facing considerable challenges. During the first five years of the king's reign, the regime allowed fairer elections, decreased media censure, acknowledged the human rights violations committed during the reign of the late King Hassan II (1961–1999), and pursued economic development programs. Other achievements include strengthening the country's foreign policy by diversifying its alliance base and upgrading its infrastructure through large-scale projects. In response to the 2011 uprisings, the regime introduced reforms that marginally limited its powers (i.e., requiring that the prime minister come from the party with the largest share of votes, and reducing the number of diplomatic and high administrative posts that could be nominated directly by the monarch).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, an Islamist party—the Justice and Development Party (PJD)—entered the government for the first time in the country's history.

However, despite these achievements, Morocco remains plagued by socioeconomic challenges. The country suffers from high unemployment rates, poverty, social inequality, mediocre healthcare and education, a persistent urban-rural divide, and tow-

ering public debt. Furthermore, the economy relies on oil imports and unstable agricultural and tourism sectors. In the last decade, protests triggered by economic hardship have faced increased repression from the regime, which fears rising instability. In fact, since the 2011 uprisings, the regime has faced great security concerns due to the emergence of the Islamic State group (IS) in neighboring countries and the Hirak movement in the historically rebellious Rif region. Two decades on, the reform process seems to have collapsed altogether.

Overall, continuous economic hardship and political restrictions will increase popular frustration and fuel further protests. Yet, the king—who remains the most powerful political actor in the country—can still deescalate this volatile situation, as the regime has not yet resorted to brutal violence. To avoid chaos, the regime should focus on: (1) bringing about concrete political opening by limiting interference in government affairs and by effectively dividing tasks between the monarchy and the government; and (2) reducing social inequality by reforming the taxation system, thereby raising funds to improve the living conditions of rural populations and to enhance education and welfare.

## ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Since Mohammed VI succeeded to the throne in 1999, Morocco has undergone noteworthy changes in terms of foreign policy, infrastructural development, and civil reform. However, concrete political reform continues to lag behind past promises, and socioeconomic challenges persist despite minor advances.

### *FOREIGN POLICY RE-DIRECTION*

Morocco has taken significant strides in foreign policy by diversifying its alliance base to pursue economic and diplomatic interests.<sup>6</sup> Under the current king, the country has rejoined the African Union (AU), developed stronger ties with

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), improved relations with Europe, and strengthened its position as an international ally in fighting terrorism and irregular migration.<sup>7</sup>

To maintain trade relations and continue to receive bilateral aid from Europe—Morocco’s largest trading partner and donor—the regime has often had to accept trade restrictions and human rights criticism from the European Union (EU). Indeed, the EU accounted for 59.4 percent of Morocco’s trade in 2017 (i.e., 64.6 percent of its exports and 56.5 percent of its imports).<sup>8</sup> At least 73 percent of Morocco’s inward foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks in 2019 came from European countries.<sup>9</sup>

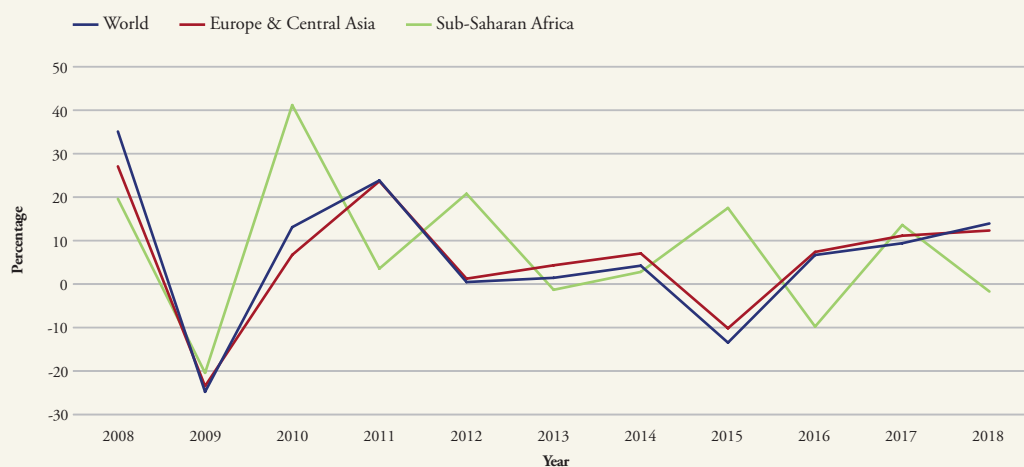
Under Mohammed VI, there has been a conscious effort to reduce this influence, and Moroccan decision-makers have striven to diversify the country’s support base by strengthening ties with GCC countries and developing new relationships with non-traditional partners, such as China and Russia.<sup>10</sup> Most striking has been the kingdom’s re-direction toward sub-Saharan Africa.

Indeed, Mohammed VI has championed greater presence within the African continent, a move that

positions the kingdom as the West’s gateway to Africa, thereby allowing it to enhance its international standing, shore up regional support, and improve its economy. Morocco rejoined the AU in 2017, more than three decades after leaving it.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the regime has demonstrated its interest in joining the Economic Community of West African States,<sup>12</sup> which invited Morocco to a recent summit.<sup>13</sup> The king has personally worked to build ties with sub-Saharan countries; he has made numerous visits to various states and signed nearly 1,000 agreements for economic, political, and security deals.<sup>14</sup>

Through the king’s efforts, Moroccan companies have increased cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa in banking, telecommunications, insurance, and manufacturing. In fact, according to the African Development Bank, 85 percent of the kingdom’s FDI went to sub-Saharan states in 2018.<sup>15</sup> Moroccan-African trade is also growing—it increased by 68 percent between 2008 and 2018 (see Figure 1),<sup>16</sup> while Moroccan exports to western Africa tripled during the same period.<sup>17</sup> Beyond boosting the kingdom’s economy and diversifying its alliance base, Morocco’s ties to sub-Saharan countries will further benefit its relationship with the EU by promoting Morocco-EU-African trade.

**Figure 1: Annual Change in Total Trade Volume with Morocco (%), 2008–18**



Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) Database, “Morocco Import in thousand US\$ all regions between 1993 and 2018,” accessed June 26, 2020, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MAR/StartYear/1993/EndYear/2018/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/BY-REGION/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL#>; WITS Database, “Morocco Export in thousand US\$ all regions between 1993 and 2018,” accessed June 26, 2020, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MAR/StartYear/1993/EndYear/2018/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/BY-REGION/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>.

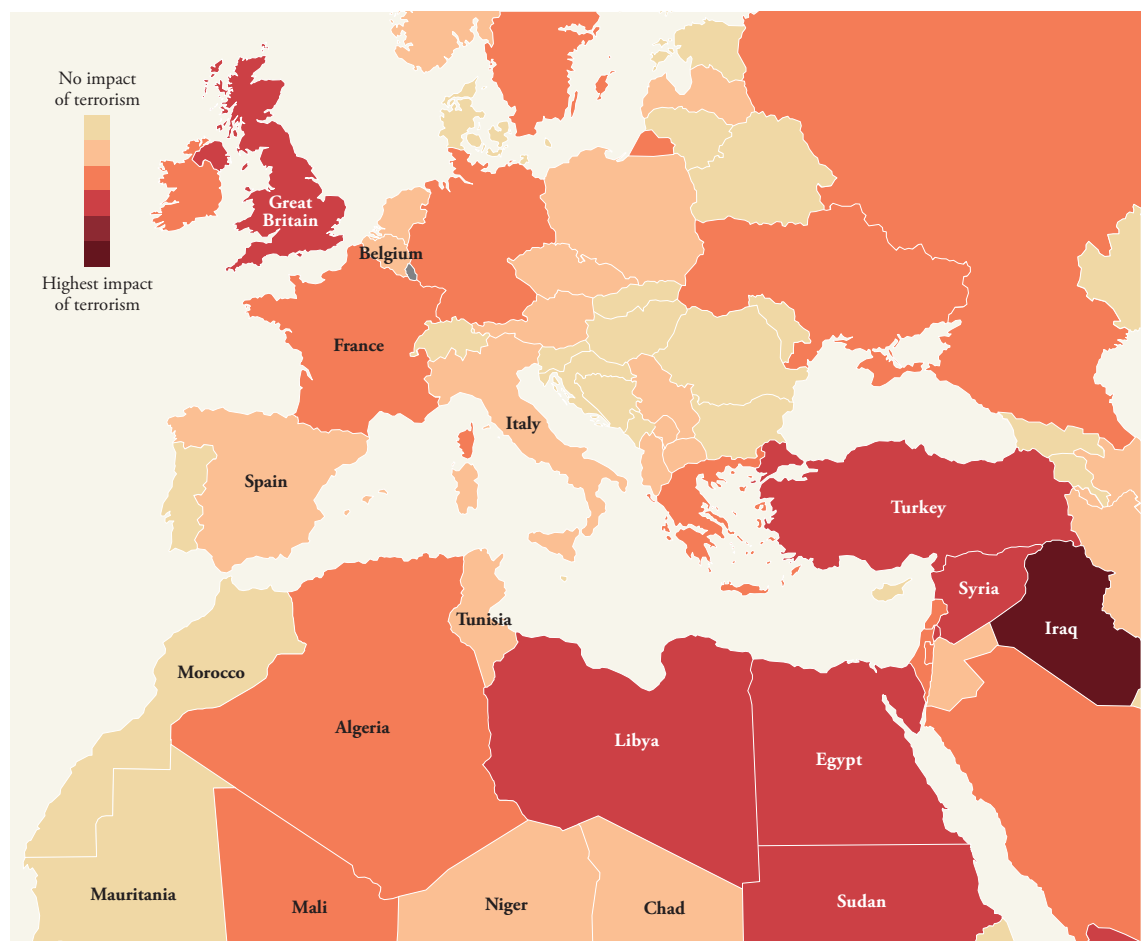
## SECURITY PLAYER

In terms of regional security, instability has grown in North Africa and the Sahel over the last decade, allowing Morocco to rise as a key counterterrorism player. Recent protests in Algeria, Sudan, and Egypt have highlighted Morocco as a zone of stability in an otherwise struggling region and as a safe ally for Western actors. Meanwhile, the kingdom's willingness to contain terrorist activity in Libya and Mali has strengthened its position as an actor that can help with counterterrorism efforts in the region.

Furthermore, Morocco has faced fewer terrorist attacks than neighboring Tunisia, Algeria, Spain, Italy, and France, a fact that may be attributed to its effective cybersecurity and counterterrorism forces (see Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Moroccan authorities maintain a network of close to 50,000 auxiliary agents that are placed in neighborhoods to inform on residents.<sup>19</sup> Counter-terrorist forces are usually able to dismantle cells before terrorist activity or planning takes place. According to the authorities, they foiled 352 attacks and dismantled over 170 cells between 2002 and 2017;<sup>20</sup> many of these were reportedly linked to IS.<sup>21</sup> Morocco's control of terrorist activity within its own borders and in other countries has made the regime an indispensable ally to the EU and United States, thereby balancing out its dependence on their financial support.

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**Figure 2:** Global Terrorism Index 2019, Number of Incidents in the MENA Region<sup>22</sup>



Source: "Global Terrorism Index 2019," Vision of Humanity, accessed June 26, 2020, <http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/terrorism-index/>.



In addition to providing the United States and EU with intelligence on terrorist cells, Moroccan counter-terrorist forces have stopped plots before they unfurled on European soil—notably in France in 2015 and Spain in 2017.<sup>23</sup> They also foiled attacks on U.S. and British ships in the Strait of Gibraltar in 2002.<sup>24</sup> The regime has also allowed the United States to carry out military training in Morocco through the annual African Lion exercise.<sup>25</sup> In return, Morocco has received support from both the EU and United States (notably through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership) to train its forces and target radicalization at the population level.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, there has been much U.S. and EU support for Morocco's soft power approach to countering radicalization through programs that train local, African, and European imams.<sup>27</sup> The success of such programs has strengthened Morocco's international position.

### *INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENTS AND NEEDS*

The regime's infrastructural development plan over the past two decades started with a push for mass electrification<sup>28</sup> before improving the country's motorway infrastructure. The regime then focused on launching a renewable energy megaproject. These costly developments will attract greater investment and tourism inflow and will eventually reduce Morocco's reliance on energy imports.

A groundbreaking achievement during Mohammed VI's reign was the construction of the country's first mega solar power complex, Noor, which saw investments of around \$9 billion.<sup>29</sup> Once complete, the complex will be the world's largest concentrated solar power plant,<sup>30</sup> able to power a city twice the size of Marrakech at peak capacity.<sup>31</sup> Most of Noor's phases are already on stream, and construction is underway for the final phase.<sup>32</sup> The aim is for 42 percent of Morocco's electrical power to come from renewable sources by 2020, and 52 percent by 2030.<sup>33</sup> This is feasible given that 35 percent of the country's electricity came from renewable sources in 2018.<sup>34</sup>

There has also been significant improvement to the country's motorway network under the current king, with the network's length having increased from around 400 kilometers in 1999 to 1,831 kilometers in 2016.<sup>35</sup> As a result, 60 percent of the population (mostly in urban areas) now has direct access to the highway network,<sup>36</sup> which connects 18 airports and 37 commercial ports (13 of which are dedicated to foreign trade).<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, after close to 16 years of planning and construction,<sup>38</sup> Morocco inaugurated Al Boraq, its first high-speed rail service, in November 2018. In its first phase, Al Boraq currently spans close to 350 kilometers, connecting Casablanca and Tangiers and reducing the travel time between them from five hours to two hours. Eventually, the high-speed rail service will extend to 1,500 kilometers throughout the country.<sup>39</sup> The project received significant criticism domestically, with major objections concerning its cost of more than \$2 billion.<sup>40</sup> Such a budget was deemed exorbitant by certain associations and political figures, given that Morocco has yet to tackle issues of weak welfare provision, healthcare, and education.

### *PERSISTENT SOCIOECONOMIC WOES*

Many macroeconomic and social indicators point to an improved socioeconomic landscape in Morocco. Since Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne, the country's per capita income (constant dollars over time) has increased from \$1,963 in 1999 to \$3,361 in 2018,<sup>41</sup> and exports have tripled.<sup>42</sup> At the social level, the primary school enrollment rate increased by over 27 points between 1999 and 2018,<sup>43</sup> the poverty headcount ratio at the national poverty line decreased from 15.3 percent in 2000 to 4.8 percent in 2013,<sup>44</sup> life expectancy increased by over eight years between 1999 and 2018,<sup>45</sup> and unemployment decreased from 13.9 percent in 1999 to 9 percent in 2019.<sup>46</sup> The economy was boosted by a strong revival of the tourism sector—indeed, the number of tourists visiting the kingdom has tripled over

the past 20 years<sup>47</sup>—and it has greatly benefited from the growth of specific industries (such as automotive and aerospace).<sup>48</sup>

However, according to the World Bank, nearly a quarter of Moroccans are poor or at risk of poverty,<sup>49</sup> and the gap between the highest and lowest socioeconomic classes is wide, pointing to great inequality. Morocco's Gini index is 40.9 percent, meaning it has barely improved since 1998.<sup>50</sup> This is the highest number in North Africa (excluding Libya, which is in the throes of civil war), followed by Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, while poverty has decreased countrywide, it is still prevalent in rural areas. Poverty rates among the rural population were twice as high as at the national level in 2018; in fact, the rural population accounted for 79.4 percent of poor people in the country.<sup>52</sup> In 2014, close to 1.2 million rural inhabitants lived under the poverty line, compared to 225,000 urban inhabitants, while 19.4 percent of the rural population was considered vulnerable compared to 7.9 percent of the urban population, according to official sources.<sup>53</sup> These numbers show a wide center-periphery wealth divide and indicate the state's failure to close the gap.

Furthermore, Morocco's economy remains largely dependent on agricultural activity, which makes it vulnerable to poor harvests and environmental shocks. The agricultural sector, which accounted for approximately 39 percent of total employment in 2018,<sup>54</sup> is highly volatile compared to the rest of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.<sup>55</sup> It remains dependent on weather conditions, meaning that any rainfall deficit or excess impacts production. Moreover, Morocco's reliance on oil imports hurts its economy every time oil prices peak. The country also has a high level of public debt, which reached \$76.8 billion in June 2019.<sup>56</sup> While Morocco's GDP has improved, its annual growth has been too small to enhance standards of living or meet society's expectations; at an average annual rate of 4 percent, it is considered low for emerging markets.<sup>57</sup>

Youth unemployment also remains a pressing problem in Morocco, where around 16.6 percent of the population is made up of young people (ages 15 to 24).<sup>58</sup> In 2019, the country had a youth unemployment rate of 22 percent nationally and 40.3 percent in urban areas.<sup>59</sup> Lower unemployment rates in rural areas (in 2018, 178,000 people in rural areas versus 990,000 people in urban areas were unemployed)<sup>60</sup> do not indicate better economic conditions. Rather, they can be attributed to the educated urban population's reticence to accept undesired positions. Indeed, evidence gathered from field research shows that educated youths in urban areas queue for desired jobs, with many preferring public sector jobs that meet their expectations as university graduates.<sup>61</sup> Within the urban middle class, even those who are employed face difficulties, as public sector workers struggle to cover basic expenses due to low wages. Overall, Morocco's lower middle class continues to face significant economic hardship. This is exacerbated by mediocre public healthcare and education, which lead some people to pay high prices in private clinics and schools.

## FREEDOMS AND RIGHTS

Undeniable progress was made in terms of women's rights during the first five years of Mohammed VI's reign. In 2004, the king reformed the family code to raise the minimum marriage age to 18 years and to grant women the right to self-guardianship, child custody, and divorce;<sup>62</sup> these were significant changes, despite some caveats.<sup>63</sup> In addition, polygamy laws were modified to require the approval of the existing wife (or wives).<sup>64</sup> However, further reforms have yet to take place, namely relating to inheritance laws, the legalization of abortion, and the abolishment of the death penalty.

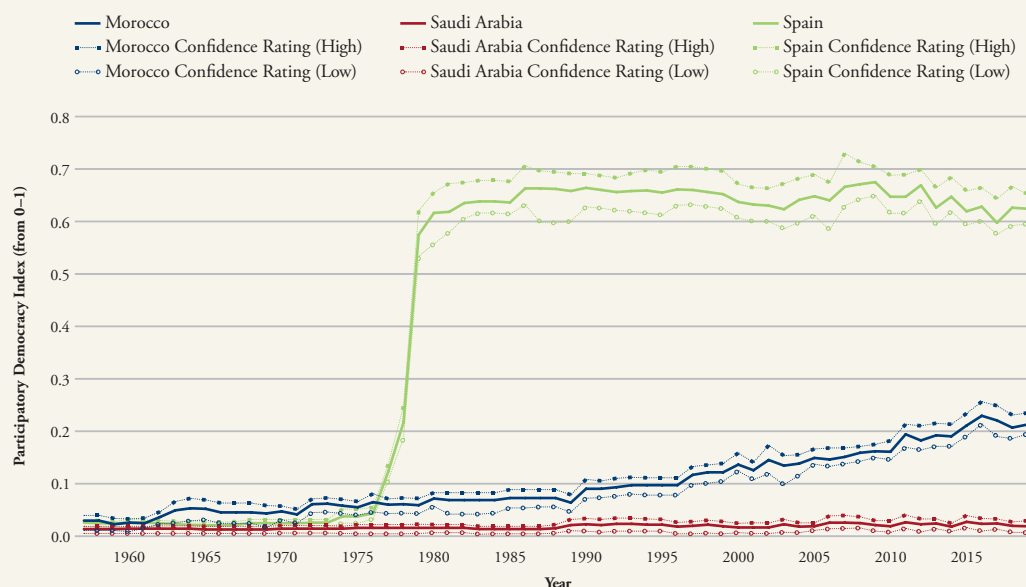
On the political front, the current king's reign has been marked by far less brutal repression than his predecessor's. The electoral process is also more transparent than it was 20 years ago, with less evidence of rigged elections and regime interference.

The 2011 uprisings resulted in granting some political freedoms, including partial empowerment of the legislative branch and free and fair parliamentary elections. The latter were won by the PJD, allowing them to enter government after having been kept out for decades.

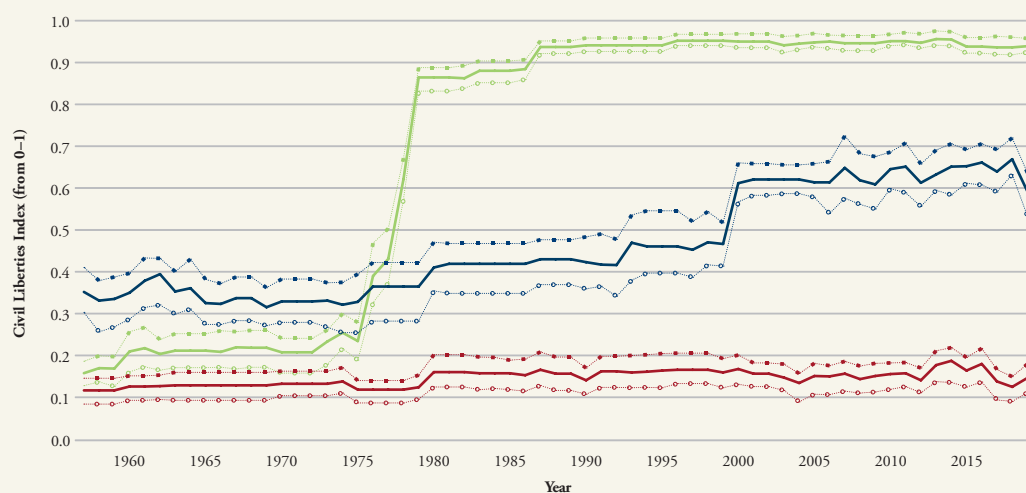
In relative terms, when comparing a non-absolute authoritarian monarchy like Morocco to an

absolute monarchy like Saudi Arabia, it is clear that the former is faring better in terms of human rights and political freedoms. However, when comparing Morocco to a constitutional monarchy like Spain, the former does not fare as well (see Figures 3 and 4). The structures and institutions that facilitate political opening exist in Morocco, but the transition remains restricted from the top.

**Figure 3:** Comparison of Participatory Democracy in Morocco, Spain, and Saudi Arabia, 1957–2019



**Figure 4:** Comparison of Civil Liberties in Morocco, Spain, and Saudi Arabia, 1957–2019



Source: Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem [Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Spain—1957–2018] Dataset v10,” Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>.



Indeed, over 20 years, the current regime has favored limited liberalization over deep change. Mohammed VI has avoided the very reforms many had hoped he would introduce relating to freedom of expression, censure of the press, and regime interference in government affairs and formation.<sup>65</sup>

Over the past 20 years, the kingdom's Freedom House rating of "Partly Free" has not changed.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the last episode of significant political opening took place under Hassan II, shortly before his death.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, repression seems to have increased following the 2011 uprisings, including heightened judicial harassment of dissidents.<sup>68</sup> In 2012, one year after the constitutional referendum, the authorities repressed protests organized by the February 20 movement, which had emphasized the wider opposition's dissatisfaction with what they deemed to be cosmetic reforms.<sup>69</sup>

The 2016–2018 protests, which took place in the historically marginalized Rif region,<sup>70</sup> were also met with repression. These protests, triggered by the death of a fishmonger crushed by a garbage truck, gained countrywide traction.<sup>71</sup> Organizers spoke out against government corruption, economic hardship, and tough living conditions. Around 150 protesters were arrested, and movement organizers were given long prison terms.<sup>72</sup> Following the Rif protests, demonstrations triggered by economic hardship in Errachidia and Jrada were also repressed.<sup>73</sup> In 2019, police forces used water cannons and batons to disperse smaller-scale demonstrations organized by specific groups (teachers, students, etc.).<sup>74</sup>

The period following the 2011 uprisings has also been marked by greater regime interference in government affairs, despite promises to ensure a more robust and independent legislative branch.<sup>75</sup> While the legislative branch is partially more empowered, elected officials do not possess the power to govern the country

or implement deep reform without the regime's permission and cooperation; effective power rests with the monarchy. Indeed, the monarch is the highest political, military, security, and religious authority, appointing key ministers (such as defense and interior), secretaries of state, and governors, among others.

Furthermore, palace-aligned parties—such as the National Rally for Independents (RNI), the Constitutional Union (UC), and the Popular Movement (MP)—interfere in government affairs and formation, as demonstrated in the aftermath of the 2016 legislative elections. The PJD—which had won a historic 125 out of 395 parliamentary seats<sup>76</sup>—needed to enter into a coalition with other parties.<sup>77</sup> However, the RNI (which won 37 seats)<sup>78</sup> formed a bloc with the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), the UC, and the MP (all parties with minor results) to increase its influence in government.<sup>79</sup> While the RNI refused to join the coalition without these parties, then-Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane rejected the USFP's participation (as it had won only 20 seats).<sup>80</sup> This resulted in a five-month deadlock that led the monarch to ask Benkirane to step down in March 2017 and to appoint current Prime Minister Saâdeddine El Othmani in his place.<sup>81</sup> El Othmani formed a coalition with the palace-aligned parties within a week,<sup>82</sup> thereby diminishing the PJD's influence in government and creating divisions within the party.

Other promises made during the 2011 uprisings for greater political freedoms (of press, speech, and organization)<sup>83</sup> did not come through. In fact, the regime has refined its tactics of controlling the media and its image. For example, business figures close to the palace control various media outlets, which spread pro-regime propaganda.<sup>84</sup> The regime rewards loyal outlets while taking to court journalists who have been critical (in these cases, courts often rule in the regime's favor).<sup>85</sup>

Individuals criticizing the regime via social media have also faced repression. Two famous YouTubers were arrested toward the end of 2019 for criticizing the king.<sup>86</sup> That same year, three Moroccan rappers released “Long Live the People,” a viral track criticizing the state and the king, which included the lyrics: “Bullets will not suffice ... I’m the hurt one ... the Moroccan citizen ... who fought for independence but never felt it ... Who took our money? ... Who was it that took the phosphates?”<sup>87</sup> As the song gained popularity within the country and internationally, one of the rappers, Gnawi, was sentenced to a year in jail for insulting the police on social media.<sup>88</sup>

## OUTLOOK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As economic hardship persists for marginalized communities and popular frustration grows due to persistent social inequality, discontent will increase and protests will multiply. The revolution in neighboring Algeria,<sup>89</sup> no matter its outcome, will only embolden Moroccans to express dissent. While this piece does not aim to predict the timeline for a tipping point, tensions are bound to boil over if the kingdom’s socioeconomic and political conditions do not improve.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The regime can still deescalate this volatile situation, despite growing expressions of popular discontent and increased protests. Indeed, it has not yet crossed over to brutal repression, and the opposition is too fragmented to mobilize the population. The regime still has time and space to rebuild its social contract with the people. To do so, it must introduce genuine reforms that would: (1) bring about concrete political opening by empowering the legislative branch, and (2) reduce social inequality by improving the living conditions of rural populations and prioritizing education and welfare.

### OPENING THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Authoritarian learning<sup>90</sup> goes both ways; as regimes modify their behavior based on what they have learned from opposition events at home and abroad, so do opposition actors. Just as the Moroccan regime has developed a successful pattern of containing opposition through a combination of promised and cosmetic reforms and repression, so have opposition actors and the wider population learned from regime behavior and grown disillusioned with its failure to deliver on a number of promises. These span from as far back as 1956, when King Mohammed V promised various political groups<sup>91</sup> a constitution that he never passed, to as recently as the 2011 uprisings, when the current king promised a new era of reform but implemented little change.

If current grievances were to boil over and fragmented opposition actors were to unify, further pledges from the regime may not suffice to contain an eventual uprising. It is therefore in the best interest of the monarchy to act pre-emptively, before the tipping point, by introducing genuine reforms and change. A good start would be for the regime to strengthen the legislative branch and grant the prime minister greater powers, thereby paving the way for more individual freedoms. This recommendation would not require the monarchy to step away from power, but rather to be involved in the political sphere in such a way that allows the legislative branch to fulfill its constitutional role.

First, the monarchy should stop palace-aligned parties from interfering in government formation and affairs. Although the RNI-led initiative that resulted in a deadlock in forming the new government in 2016 and the subsequent ousting of Benkirane did not violate the text of any constitutional articles,<sup>92</sup> these actions did not respect the spirit of the constitution.

Second, the monarchy and the government need to agree on an effective division of tasks. There are

fields in which the monarchy has been extraordinarily successful and which it should continue to oversee—most notably foreign policy, international business initiatives, and the development of business-oriented infrastructure. However, the legislative branch should take charge of affairs related to domestic politics and the economy and be given more control over public funds, in order to carry out successful socioeconomic and political reforms.

### *TARGETING SOCIAL INEQUALITY*

To tackle social inequality, the regime should focus on three key aspects: (1) reducing the gap between rural and urban populations; (2) increasing the literacy rate for affected groups; and (3) raising more funds to make these changes possible.

To address the urban-rural divide in the short term, more funds should be allocated to rural areas that lack infrastructure and electricity, and which have not benefited from the same massive improvements as urban areas. The regime should focus on upgrading and adding to roads in rural areas, as well as building schools and health clinics in remote villages.

For a long-term solution, the regime must work toward reducing illiteracy, especially among the segments of the population most affected (in this case, women and rural inhabitants). To address this issue successfully, the regime must allocate funds to: (1) encourage and enable families to send their children to school and prevent dropout, and (2) allow illiterate adults to access literacy courses. Major obstacles to childhood education include poverty and distance. The regime must reinforce the public school system with more financial and human resources, give poor families cash incentives to keep their children in school, and set up more schools in remote villages. To reduce adult illiteracy, the regime must allocate funding to literacy courses, provide more courses across the kingdom, and encourage private employers to allow illiterate employees to attend such trainings.

To make these costly changes, the regime must raise more funds, especially as high public debt and dependency on oil imports have limited available state funding. There are several ways to do this, including: improving the tax collection system; spending less on megaprojects; reducing subsidies; and reforming the country's taxation policy. Although the last option may generate significant political pushback from the higher income groups, it is the most straightforward option, given the regime's propensity to develop large-scale projects, the cuts already made to the subsidy system following the 2011 uprisings, and the economic implications of the ongoing coronavirus crisis. The country's income taxation policy is currently progressive to 38 percent for six different income groups.<sup>93</sup> People in the highest income group (the sixth one) earn over 180,000 dirhams per month, or close to \$18,500. This policy can be reformed to include a seventh income group that would be taxed at a higher percentage. For example, people who earn more than 500,000 dirhams per month (around \$55,000) could be taxed at a rate of 44 percent. Higher taxes should also be collected on property and wealth.

### **CONCLUSION**

King Mohammed VI's twenty-first year on the throne marks around a decade since the 2011 uprisings reached Morocco, and a decade since the king promised political opening and change that would meet the demands of the protest movement.<sup>94</sup> This symbolic date may explain the growing dissatisfaction with the regime among the media, the opposition, and the population. However, it has not all been bad—far from it. The king has introduced important changes in terms of foreign policy, infrastructure, and women's rights. In the beginning of the king's reign, the regime allowed some political opening and committed to increasing economic development. Following the 2011 uprisings, the regime introduced reforms that marginally limited its powers and allowed

an Islamist party to lead the government for the first time in the country's history.

Yet, so much more could and should be done to open the political sphere and address massive inequality. With protests rocking neighboring Algeria, as well as Lebanon and Iraq, and with persistent economic hardship and political restrictions fueling popular frustrations, protests are bound to increase. The economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic (due to disrupted trade flows, reduced tourism, a potential European crisis, and increased public spending) will only exacerbate Morocco's economic hardship.

To keep tensions from boiling over, the regime should focus on: (1) bringing about concrete political opening by minimizing interference in government affairs and by effectively dividing tasks between the monarchy and the government; and (2) reducing social inequality by reforming the taxation system, thereby raising funds to improve the living conditions of rural populations and to enhance education and welfare. Such changes would improve the country's political and socioeconomic landscapes and would make it, in the monarch's own words, "a country that accommodates all its sons and daughters; a country in which all citizens—without exception—enjoy the same rights and have the same obligations, in an environment where freedom and human dignity prevail."<sup>95</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Yasmina Abouzzohour is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center (BDC) and an associate research fellow at the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA). She is currently writing a book on regime survival in MENA monarchies and completing several projects on the politics and economy of North African states. She holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Oxford, where she taught comparative politics, international relations, and economic governance, and a B.A. in Political Science from Columbia University. The author would like to thank Fatima Al-Naimi, the BDC research and communications teams, and the two anonymous reviewers for their help. The academic research on which this paper is based was completed with generous support from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the American Political Science Association. Finally, a very special thank you to the Moroccan interviewees who made this and related research possible.
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