

# WHAT MOROCCANS EXPECT FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**Morocco's domestic challenges are giving greater urgency to certain aspects of the EU-Morocco relationship even as the traditional pillars – security, migration and trade – remain important.**

Morocco's domestic challenges are giving greater urgency to certain aspects of the EU-Morocco relationship even as the traditional pillars of the relationship – security, migration and trade – remain important. EU policy-makers should be aware that many Moroccans are thinking beyond these traditional aspects. On these historical pillars, EU-Morocco relations have faced a number of challenges over the past few years, particularly tensions around migration and the status of the Western Sahara (Fakir, 2018). Yet many Moroccans seem eager for the relationship to also reflect internal challenges. Over the past two years, Morocco has been navigating a series of internal political and social crises, which at their heart are about the quality of governance: whether the palace or the elected government ought to be empowered to govern the country and, consequently, who ought to be held accountable for any failures.

The 2018 Euromed Survey revealed that Moroccans think democracy, rule of law and good governance should be the most important aspects of EU-Morocco relations (see Graph 1). Respondents also indicated that the EU's support for authoritarian regimes is likely to have the most negative effect on the stability of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (Euromed Survey, 2018). That many Moroccans think democracy and effective governance should be part of the country's EU relations is a result of circumstances that have been amplified since 2011.

**In the wave of protests in the Rif, citizens protested their marginalisation and the failure of local and national governance.**

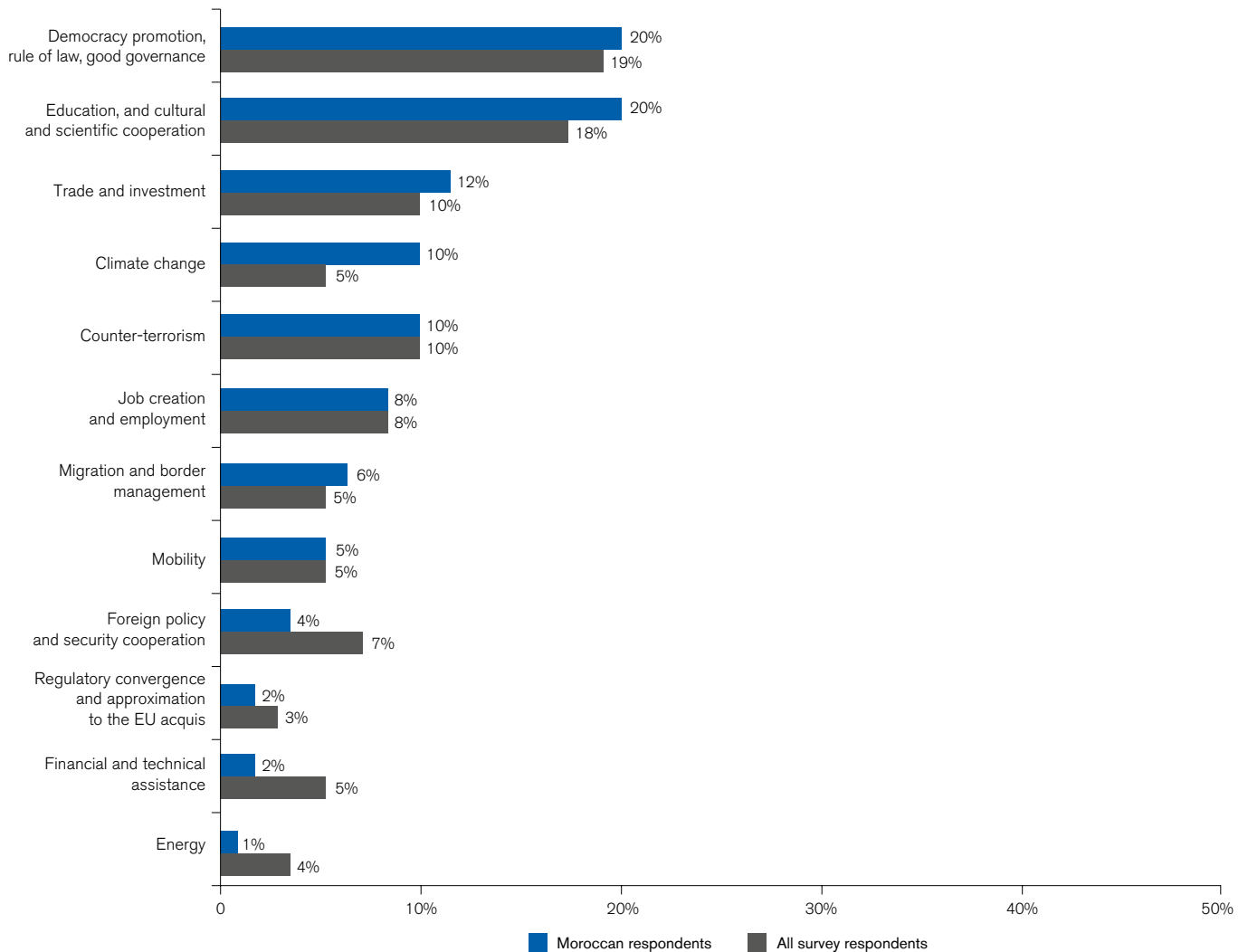
Relative to other countries in the region, Morocco charted a more stable path forward during the 2011 protests. The Moroccan protest movement did not aim to topple the regime – the monarch, in this case – but rather called on it to reform. People envisioned the king playing a role in which he “reigned but did not govern”. Indeed, Mohammed VI, under pressure from the growing protest movement, promised constitutional reforms that passed in July 2011, ceding some historically royal privileges to the government and parliament. A timid implementation of the constitutional changes followed, but over the past two years there has been a clear reversal. In one notable example, the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD), at the centre of the push and pull between monarchy and government about how much responsibility (and accountability) ought to be given to the government, won a second term in 2016. After its win, the monarchy became intent on regaining control of the political process by cajoling and intimidating the various political parties with which the PJD needed to ally to form a coalition. This orchestrated political crisis stalled the government formation process and resulted in a weak coalition led by a deeply damaged and compromised PJD. Morocco's elected government returned to being a weak institution again, subject to citizens' scorn.

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The government formation crisis was the backdrop for a tense period in the Rif, where citizens led a wave of protests against the authorities – both the government and the monarchy – over a long list of grievances they could no longer stomach. The Rif protests started in October 2016, following the death of a fish vendor during an encounter with the police that galvanised the region and generated several solidarity marches across the country. Citizens of the Rif protested their marginalisation and the failure of local and national governance. This northern region, among others, struggles with lower development rates (HCP, 2014). As the newly-formed but weak government struggled to maintain unity, additional protests broke out in Draa-Tafilalet in the Atlas Mountains in summer 2017 due to lack of potable

water. Also in Jerada, a town in Morocco's eastern region, after two men perished while trying to mine coal they could sell to survive. More recently, since April 2018 a boycott campaign has been targeting three large companies that exemplify the influence of business on politics and vice versa (Fakir, 2018).

**Graph 1: The most important aspects, when it comes to my country's relationship with the EU should be:**  
(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 12)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

This popular unrest has highlighted the long-running frustration at uneven development in Morocco and the disaffection many feel toward politics and the current balance of power. Morocco's incongruous story is puzzling and endlessly frustrating to its own people. Morocco is a stable country with a growing economy where the government is engaged in a seemingly endless overhaul of everything from infrastructure to education. The government has undertaken a number of promising economic endeavours, including championing progressive reforms to encourage foreign direct investment. The government is also pioneering innovative approaches to alternative energy. Morocco recently completed setting up the largest solar production site in the world, the Noor Ouarzazate solar complex, which will contribute to meeting the country's goal of producing 42% of the country's electric power needs by 2020 (Xinhua, 2018).

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While the country has developed significantly since the 1990s, these improvements have failed to meet the potential many Moroccans believe their country is capable of reaching. More remains to be done. The United Nations' Human Development Report ranked Morocco 123 out of 189 countries, even behind Palestine and Iraq, two conflict-ridden nations (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). What remains a point of frustration for many Moroccans is the uneven development. Sophisticated green energy initiatives, an ambitious high-speed rail plan and increased foreign direct investment in certain parts of the country are juxtaposed with lack of roads, electricity or running water in other areas.

The country continues to lag behind and struggle with seemingly straightforward governance. Moroccans' frustration has in the past manifested as political apathy. Most have long viewed participation in the political system as pointless and have accurately seen the monarchy – not elected officials – as the sole source of change. Since 2011 and particularly since 2016, however, this frustration is manifesting as anger and eagerness for action. This disappointment in the political elite and governing institutions also drives Moroccans' view that democracy is or ought to be an important aspect of their country's relationship with the EU. This belief underlies their desire to see political reform, better service provision and effective and accountable institutions in charge, in keeping with global progress.

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The EU is not simply seen as a trade partner and important source of foreign direct investment but also as an actor capable of helping to strengthen the country's rule of law, democracy and governance. EU-Morocco cooperation is capable of promoting better governance and human development ahead of cooperation on security or migration (see Graph 1).

Equally important is the desire to see EU-Morocco engagement reflected in greater social development. Education is singled out as one of the obstacles to development. Inadequate service provision, inequitable development across the country, still-too-high levels of illiteracy and lack of economic and social opportunity have raised citizens' anger in recent years. The government spends adequately on education: in 2018, 27.3% of the state's budget went to education, including personnel costs (Draft Budget Law, 2018). However, this and various reform initiatives have failed to improve the lot of schools and students. The latest estimates still put illiteracy rates at a staggering 32.2%. While the country has come a long way, even just from 2000, when the illiteracy rate was 54.9%, education remains an issue, even among youth (Ibourk & Amaghous, 2014). The latest available statistics indicate primary school enrolment has steadily risen to 96.8% among boys and 95.6% among girls, but this progress has not extended to secondary education. Only 37% of eligible students attend secondary school (UNICEF, 2012).

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In the face of these challenges, the government has faltered on education. In 2009, an "Emergency Plan" sought to accelerate the National Plan for Education and Training, which was replaced with a new strategic plan in 2015. The 2015 strategic plan claims various successes: additional physical buildings in rural areas for the 2016-2017 school year (and more planned for 2018-2019) and expansion of school rooms. More recently, in August 2018 the ministerial council approved a framework law with a host of reforms targeting the education system, including vocational training and scientific research (Kasraoui, 2018). These plans made little difference in appeasing Moroccans' concerns about the quality of education. The Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research (CSEFRS) is also looking to provide vocational training to address the mismatch of available skills and employment needs. Higher education is another sore point where there is little political will to advance badly needed reforms (Chihab, 2018). University graduates regularly protest their lack of prospects upon graduation, and teachers protest poor pay. Most of the successes claimed by the CSEFRS are recent, leaving it unclear whether these are enough to address the issues at hand. Although the EU supports Morocco's higher education reform efforts (Le Matin, 2018), support for these projects remains small compared to the amounts spent on security and migration.

Morocco recently received 272 million dollars from the EU to increase its border policing (Karam, 2018) after Morocco rejected the idea of hosting migrant screening centres or “regional disembarkation centres” for the EU (Rankin & Wintour, 2018). This all follows a feud surrounding EU court rulings in 2015 and 2016 to exclude the Western Sahara from fisheries and agricultural agreements. These rulings tanked relations, and although the agreements have been renewed to Morocco’s satisfaction, relations are barely on the mend. Through migration and security, the Moroccan government is able to wield significant influence on EU institutions and direct the relationship’s focus. Yet the degree to which Moroccans see security as a secondary concern whereas European counterparts see it as a primary one is noteworthy. That is not to say that Moroccans do not value their country’s stability, or their government’s role in that of the EU, but it reflects citizens’ preoccupation with improving their standards of living and seeing “dignity” available to them.

Putting greater focus on supporting development schemes that go to the heart of the governance issue would reflect Moroccans’ desired relationship with the EU. Contrary to EU established wisdom that vocal support for greater political reform risks undermining stability, clear EU support for meaningful reform would benefit Morocco’s stability by echoing Moroccans’ own wishes for their future. EU officials, as a matter of priority and style, often appear reluctant to push for greater political reforms or speak out against human rights violations and authoritarian tendencies, believing that would destabilise a country they see as comparatively stable. Yet speaking out against the undermining of freedom and democracy would not only put the EU on the side of the Moroccan people but would also benefit the long-term stability of the country. Increasingly, the risks to Moroccan stability stem from popular frustration with the government and the monarchy’s growing failure to govern the country effectively.

Signs that the Moroccan government is wooing Africa are unmistakable, driving the view that the country’s foreign priorities are increasingly looking southward. But the reality remains that the EU is a vital partner for Morocco, financially and strategically. In that sense, the EU can play an even larger role in nudging the leadership toward greater political reforms, and more crucially in supporting local development, thereby delivering an important message that the EU cares about Moroccans as much as it cares about the institutions that have failed them.

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