

# The Return of Morocco to the African Union

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Morocco's joining the African Union in January 2017 rectified the empty-chair policy that led Rabat to withdraw from the Organization of African Unity in 1984 after full membership was extended to the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

Its absence from this multilateral forum prevented Morocco from participating in the refounding of the organization in 2001, when it was transformed into the African Union (AU). It also meant it could not take part in regional development initiatives for Africa like NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development). Moroccan diplomacy opted for a proactive approach in an attempt to minimize the impact of its absence and to compensate for this through selective bilateralism with "friendly" countries from French-speaking Central and West Africa.

## The Limits of African Politics

Since the arrival to the throne of Mohammed VI in 1999, relations with Sub-Saharan Africa became a foreign policy priority, in which attempts were made to reassess Morocco's role as a continental power capable of leading Africa's South-South cooperation and acting as a bridge between the continent

and the European Union. This position was evidenced in 2000 when the monarch announced, at the EU-Africa summit, that he would cancel the foreign debts of Africa's least developed countries.

This aspiration, however, ran contrary to a policy that conditioned bilateral cooperation on the positions held by the different African countries regarding the Western Sahara issue, thereby limiting Morocco's capacity for action in West and Southern Africa.

The usefulness of decoupling these issues has, as of 2014, been dealt with in reports drafted by think tanks close to the royal palace, such as the Amadeus Institute or the Royal Institute for Strategic Studies, which reflected upon Morocco's African policy.<sup>1</sup> The strategy followed until then, based on seeking support from allied countries that did not recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and influencing the African Union's decision-making through them, was brought into question, as it failed to neutralize Algeria and South Africa's capacity to orientate the positions of the African organization on the Western Sahara issue (for example, 2014's appointment of the former President of Mozambique Joaquim Chissano, known for his pro-Sahrawi stance, as the AU's Special Envoy for Western Sahara). The limits of this strategy justified its replacement with a more proactive and realistic diplomacy that would allow relations to be stepped up with all African states regardless of their positions on the Western Sahara issue. This opening towards "hostile" countries was aimed at helping to overcome the "uncomfortable" absence from the African Union at a time when the organization was increasingly being seen by the international community as an unavoidable actor for upholding peace, preventing conflicts and economic development.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Le Maroc et l'Afrique. Pour une mobilisation nationale d'envergure*, Institut Amadeus, Rabat 2014 y *Quelles perspectives de développement des relations du Maroc avec l'Afrique australe et l'Afrique de l'Est ?*, IRES, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Maroc et l'Afrique. Pour une mobilisation nationale d'envergure*, Institut Amadeus, Rabat 2014, pp. 24-25.

## The End of the Empty-Chair Policy

The notion that its absence from the decision-making bodies of the AU was weakening Morocco's position, both regionally and internationally, was the main argument for justifying a pragmatic decision that implied crossing certain red lines. Membership of the AU meant breaking the taboo of cohabitating with the SADR, under equal conditions, in an international organization in which the Sahrawi Republic was a founding member and whose Founding Charter did not contain mechanisms for expelling its members. The plan to return to the AU was announced by Mohammed VI in July 2016 in a letter sent to the 27th Summit held in Rwanda, in which he justified his decision declaring that *"quand un corps est malade, il est mieux soigné de l'intérieur que de l'extérieur."* Although the monarch's message did not set the SADR's suspension as a condition for his country's return, Moroccan diplomacy suggested that the 28 member states table what turned out to be an unprosperous motion during the summit to freeze the Sahrawi Republic's presence in the pan-African organization.

The formal request for membership was made in September, although the aim of recovering "Morocco's natural place in the African continent"<sup>3</sup> was not achieved until four months later during the organization of the 28th summit of the AU held in Addis Ababa in January 2017, when the pan-African organization approved Morocco's entry with the backing of 39 of its 54 members.

### Diplomatic Action: a Snapshot of Rabat's Soft Power

Morocco's return to the AU has been marked by a frenetic and intense diplomacy which has seen Mohammed VI travel to a number of African capitals during the last quarter of 2016 and first of 2017. It is worth noting that this tour around the continent has coincided with the country's political paralysis dur-

ing the five months following the October 2016 legislative elections. In effect, the difficulty in forming a new coalition government has led to an impasse interrupted only for Parliament to open on 16 January, faced with the need to ratify the law pertaining to the AU's constituent act. The royal initiative could therefore be seen in this renewed Africanist mission and the prominent role of certain royal advisors; ministers with a more technocratic, rather than partisan, profile – Interior, Foreign Affairs and Islamic Affairs – and businessmen close to the Palace, as compared with the internationally invisible (acting) cabinet chief, Abdelilah Benkirane, or other members of his party (Justice and Development Party, PJD).<sup>4</sup>

Membership of the AU meant breaking the taboo of cohabitating with the SADR, in an international organization in which the Sahrawi Republic was a founding member

In a break from the past, the tour of Mohammed VI and his entourage included countries from East Africa which recognize the SADR, like Rwanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and South Sudan. Following in this logic was the opening of five new embassies in the continent (Rwanda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Mauritius and Benin) and the Alawite kingdom's reception of African leaders unaccustomed to visiting Maghrebi countries, like Paul Kagamé, and its rapprochement to Kigali. As well as the classical, diplomatic tools, Rabat's approach to this area, outside of its traditional comfort zone, has revolved around two main axes: economic cooperation and religious and cultural diplomacy. Indeed, Mohammed VI's tour has delivered numerous cooperation agreements, promises and an increase in investments, as well as setting the stage for the launch of several joint projects, such as the gas pipeline between Morocco and Nigeria or the

<sup>3</sup> "Discours de SM le Roi adressé à la nation à l'occasion du 41ème anniversaire de la Marche Verte," available at [www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-de-sm-le-roi-adresse-la-nation-loccasion-du-41eme-anniversaire-de-la-marche](http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-de-sm-le-roi-adresse-la-nation-loccasion-du-41eme-anniversaire-de-la-marche)

<sup>4</sup> The royal party travelling around Africa is made up of the following advisors – Fouad Ali El Himma and Yassir Zenagui-, ministers - Salaheddine Mezouar (Foreign Affairs Minister), Nasser Bourita (Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister), Aziz Akhannouch (Agricultural Minister), Mohamed Hassad (Interior Minister), Mohamed Boussaid (Economy Minister) and Ahmed Toufiq (Habous and Islamic Affairs Minister); and members of civil society - Brahim Fassi Fihri (Amadeus Institute).

construction of a mega fertilizer plant in Ethiopia. Besides hydrocarbons and agriculture, the telecommunications, finance and insurance sector also form part of Morocco's interests in the region.

To support the development of these projects, and as a new tool in the service of economic diplomacy towards the African continent, Morocco set up the Ithmar Capital sovereign investment fund in November 2016.<sup>5</sup> This initiative can be added to the actions of the Mohammed VI Foundation for Sustainable Development, created in 2008 and tasked with channelling assistance and cooperation with African countries in the areas of health, education and socioeconomic development. As explained by the monarch at the year's beginning,<sup>6</sup> the logic of foreign actions is built on South-South cooperation and on promoting development in the region. In this regard, to build a broader cooperative and relational fabric, it is not only public institutions that need to be activated but also privately owned enterprises. Hence, led by the president of the General Confederation of Moroccan Companies (CGEM), Miriem Bensalah Chaqroun, several Moroccan business people with interests in the continent followed in the wake of the royal party. This economic offensive has contributed to Morocco becoming the second African investor in the continent behind South Africa.

### *Religious Leadership and Public Diplomacy*

The reconnection with the African continent has not been undertaken on solely economic and financial terms. As a cornerstone of this renewed policy, Mohammed VI is bolstering his religious leadership. To this end, the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema was created in July 2015 to "promote, disseminate and consolidate the values of tolerant Islam."<sup>7</sup> By fostering a "modern" religious vision and training imams from different African countries, like

Mali or Burkina Faso, Rabat offers *security expertise*. In fact, at a time when the continent's leaders are looking on with concern at the Sahel and the mounting challenges of jihadism, Morocco is capitalizing on its anti-radical model: that of a country committed to the fight against terrorism, not just through cooperation in security (testimony to which is its military intervention in Mali), but also through education and the promotion of "the true image of the noble Islamic religion and its tolerant values."<sup>8</sup>

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Lastly, Rabat is also mobilizing its tourism potential, cultural heritage and aspirations to become a leader in education within Africa. According to an IRES report, the aim of Moroccan public diplomacy and its target public is twofold.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, it seeks to attract "the middle classes of the emerging [African] countries," i.e., possible occasional visitors and potential students who may extend their stays in the country. In this regard, on 8 February 2017, the Moroccan National Tourist Office (ONMT) opened its first African office in Dakar and announced plans to increase the number of offices in the continent to promote African tourism in Morocco, which has increased by 17%<sup>10</sup> in the last year. In addition, public and private universities are increasingly offering training in English, with the aim of extending bridges to the English-speaking part of the continent. This is indeed fertile ground, as, according to the latest published statistics, 88.43% of foreign students in Morocco

<sup>5</sup> GHARBAOUI, Hayat. "COP22: Le Maroc se dote d'un fonds souverain et lance un partenariat avec la Banque mondiale," *TelQuel*, 16/11/2016, available at [http://telquel.ma/2016/11/16/cop-22-le-maroc-se-dote-dun-fonds-souverain-et-lance-un-partenariat-avec-la-banque-mondiale\\_1523813](http://telquel.ma/2016/11/16/cop-22-le-maroc-se-dote-dun-fonds-souverain-et-lance-un-partenariat-avec-la-banque-mondiale_1523813).

<sup>6</sup> "Message de SM le Roi adressé aux participants au Forum Crans Montana de Dakhla," *Discours du Roi*, 18/03/2016, available at [www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/sm-le-roi-adresse-un-message-aux-participants-au-forum-crans-montana-de-dakhla](http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/sm-le-roi-adresse-un-message-aux-participants-au-forum-crans-montana-de-dakhla).

<sup>7</sup> To see the Mohammed VI Foundation of African Ulema, under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Habous, [www.habous.gov.ma/fr/fondation-mohammed-vi-des-oul%C3%A9ma-africains](http://www.habous.gov.ma/fr/fondation-mohammed-vi-des-oul%C3%A9ma-africains)

<sup>8</sup> [www.mapnews.ma/es/activites-royales/sm-el-rey-preside-en-fez-el-acto-de-instalacion-de-los-miembros-del-consejo-superi](http://www.mapnews.ma/es/activites-royales/sm-el-rey-preside-en-fez-el-acto-de-instalacion-de-los-miembros-del-consejo-superi)

<sup>9</sup> INSTITUT ROYAL DES ETUDES STRATÉGIQUES, (IRES). *La diplomatie culturelle marocaine : Proposition d'un modèle rénové*, 2016, available at [www.ires.ma/documents\\_reviews/diplomatie-culturelle-marocaine-proposition-dun-modele-renove/](http://www.ires.ma/documents_reviews/diplomatie-culturelle-marocaine-proposition-dun-modele-renove/)

<sup>10</sup> "L'Office marocain de tourisme ouvre sa première délégation africaine à Dakar," *APA News*, 10/02/2017, at <http://apanews.net/fr/news/office-marocain-de-tourisme-ouvre-sa-premiere-delegation-africaine-a-dakar>

come from African countries.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, think tanks, which are taking on a new relevance in promotion abroad, are pushing to have an impact on public opinion and influence the elite classes.

### *African Connection at Home Too*

To prepare a complete and effective strategy, Moroccan soft power needs not just to act abroad, but also to have a coherent domestic counterpart. In this regard, one needs to understand the second phase of immigrant regularization driven forward and declared by Mohammed VI on 12 December, 2016. The announcement, which especially affected the Sub-Saharan population, sought to place Morocco as an antithesis to Algeria in the region, a country accused of carrying out a policy of “discrimination and violence” against Sub-Saharans.<sup>12</sup>

To this legal decision are added other initiatives of an economic and cultural nature that complete the Alawite kingdom’s strategy of *Africanization*. Festivals and exhibitions focused on Africa have turned Rabat into a leading capital of culture, and Casablanca into a business and development hub within the region. At a time when the appeal of the continent’s traditional leaders – the US and European countries – is in decline and that of other actors – such as China or India – is on the rise, Morocco is seeking to position itself as a model of economic, cultural, social and also religious and political development. A response to this goal was the presence of observers from African nations like Niger, Togo and Senegal at the 2016 legislative elections,<sup>13</sup> as well as the banning of the burka in public spaces.

### **Challenges and Uncertainty**

Once back in the AU, Morocco is facing the challenge of how to conciliate the defence of its “sacred cause” with its condition as a member of the organization, committed to the continent’s shared challenges. Only time will tell if the defence of the Mo-

roccanness of Western Sahara will prevail, thereby transforming the pan-African organization into a stage for confronting the Polisario Front and its allies, or if a pragmatic and realistic vision will win out, contributing to strengthening Morocco’s condition as a regional power and a bridge between the African continent and Europe. The latter is the motivation for Morocco’s request to join ECOWAS, submitted by Mohammed VI in February 2017.

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<sup>11</sup> MINISTÈRE DE L’ÉDUCATION NATIONALE. *Effectifs des Etudiants Etrangers*, 2016 at [www.enssup.gov.ma/sites/default/files/STATISTIQUES/421/Etrangers.pdf](http://www.enssup.gov.ma/sites/default/files/STATISTIQUES/421/Etrangers.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> FILALI, Kenza. “Migrants : Mohammed VI prend le contre-pied de l’Algérie,” *Le Desk*, 12/12/2016, at <https://ledesk.ma/2016/12/12/migrants-mohammed-vi-prend-le-contre-pied-de-lalgerie/>

<sup>13</sup> MAP. “Les législatives marocaines vues par des observateurs africains,” 20/07/2016, at <http://fr.le360.ma/politique/les-legislatives-marocaines-vues-par-des-observateurs-africains-90367>.