

Towards a New Social Pact in Morocco? The “New” Development Model and the COVID-19 Crisis¹

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On the twentieth anniversary of his enthronement, Mohammed VI acknowledged “the inability of our development model to meet the growing needs of part of our citizens, to reduce social inequalities and spatial disparities.”² He had previously spoken in this regard to Parliament in 2017, pointing out the model’s “difficulties and shortcomings”³ and thus implicitly “questioning his development policy for the first time.”⁴ Starting in 2019, however, he began to present the issue as a priority on the royal and state agenda, announcing the creation of a commission to propose a new development model. Over 2019 and 2020, this agenda was further marked by the emergence of the health, social and economic crises linked to the coronavirus and a renewed social unrest challenging the violation of individual freedoms.

A Moroccan-Style “New Deal?”

On 20 August 2019, Mohammed VI argued:

“The new version of this development model constitutes a solid basis for the emergence of a new social contract with unanimous adherence, encompassing the state and its institutions and the nation’s living forces, including the private sector, political parties, trade unions, associations, and the people as a whole.”⁵

He thus sought to jump-start a new social pact that would make it possible to overcome the protests from the periphery and rekindle the trust of the people, especially amongst the urban middle classes. According to a study published by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, 69% of Moroccans are concerned about the country’s political direction and 55.5% express uncertainty and anxiety regarding the economic situation.⁶

A 2019 Oxfam report ranked the country as the most unequal in all North Africa. Although the poverty rate has declined, from 15.3% in 2001 to 4.5% in 2014, the disparities between rural and urban areas are considerable. By 2014, urban poverty had almost been eradicated (1.6%), but rural poverty remained six times higher (9.5%). The challenges facing the new development model include youth unemployment (which, in 2017, stood at 42% of young people aged 15-24 in urban areas), the inclusion of women in the workforce (only 22% work) and ac-

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² “Texte intégral de SM le Roi Mohammed VI adressé à la Nation à l’occasion de la Fête du Trône.” *Les Discours du Roi*, 31 July 2019.

³ “Full Text of HM the King’s Speech at Parliament Opening.” *Royal Activities*, 13 October 2017.

⁴ CHAHIR, Aziz. “Crise socio-économique au Maroc: à quoi sert la monarchie?” *Middle East Eye*, 17 December 2018.

⁵ “Sa Majesté le Roi adresse un discours à la Nation à l’occasion du 66-ème anniversaire de la Révolution du Roi et du Peuple.” *Les Discours du Roi*, 20 August 2019.

⁶ “Trust in Institutions Index: Preliminary Findings.” *MIPA Institute*, December 2019.

cess to quality employment (the informal sector affects 80% of the working population).⁷

The reform falls within a logic of continuity and is intended to promote the image of a monarchy that is sensitive to the needs of Moroccans. Mohammed VI announced the creation of a special commission, to be headed by Chakib Benmoussa (former Interior Minister and current ambassador to France) and mostly made up of people with heterogeneous profiles from the technocracy, business and, in some cases, the education sector and civil society, which will be tasked with analysing the problem and proposing solutions. This formula allows the Palace to assume the reformist leadership and places the new development model in the orbit of technocratic know-how whilst at the same time circumventing political debate and the testing of ideas regarding the possible economic and social models at play.

The Fight for Individual Freedoms at the Centre of the Storm

"My uterus, my choice, my freedom" was one of the slogans chanted by the protesters in front of the court of first instance in Rabat on 9 September at the start of the trial of Hajar Raissouni. Her arrest, together with those of her fiancé and the medical team accused of performing an abortion for her, reopened several debates:

- a) The first concerns sexual freedom and the movement to repeal Articles 453 (which allows abortion only in case of risk to the mother's health) and 490 (which prohibits extra-marital sexual relations) of the Criminal Code. This demand was backed by civil society organizations and citizens who, in an open letter that went viral, declared themselves "outlaws."
- b) The second concerns freedom of the press and speech. In circles more critical of the re-

gime, suspicions had spread that Raissouni's arrest had to do with her coverage of the Rif protests for the critical newspaper *Al Akhbar Al Yaoum*. The subsequent wave of arrests in autumn 2019, linked to the voicing of political criticism on social media, seems to bolster this hypothesis, maintained by Reporters Without Borders, and underscores the fragility of the social pact, especially amongst the younger generations.

- c) The third links the arrest of Raissouni, the niece of former MUR⁸ leader Ahmed Raissouni, to a series of scandals related to issues of morality intended to highlight a hypothetical hypocrisy on the part of the PJD, the main Islamist party currently in government, and the limits of its differentiating and moralizing discourse. Indeed, the fact that Islamists and leftist activists stood together on this issue is pointed to, along with the will to contain the social protest and international criticism, as one of the factors explaining the pardon subsequently granted by Mohammed VI.⁹

Covid-19: Control of the Health Crisis, Visibility of the Social Crisis and Geopolitical Opportunity

After detecting the country's first positive case of COVID-19 on 2 March, Morocco implemented a series of drastic measures to control the pandemic: a population-wide lockdown, closure of schools and mosques, a 6:00 p.m. curfew and suspension of all international air, land and sea connections from 17 March on. The extension of the state of emergency from 20 March to 10 July made it possible to successfully control the pandemic (Morocco has some 2,000 active cases and a total of 214 reported deaths),¹⁰ but it left several political, socio-economic and diplomatic lessons that go beyond the relatively limited scope of the health crisis:

⁷ OXFAM. "Un Maroc égalitaire, une taxation juste." 2019. See also: DESRUES, Thierry and GARCIA DE PAREDES, Marta. "Political and civic participation of young people in North Africa: behaviours, discourses and opinions." *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos* No.26, p. 1-22, 2019.

⁸ Movement of Unity and Reform, a charitable and religious association that serves as the ideological arm of the PJD.

⁹ MASBAH, Mohammed. "Is Raissouni's Pardon Simply Playing Politics in Morocco?" *MIPA Institute*, November 2019. See: CASANI, Alfonso. "Cross-ideological coalitions under authoritarian regimes: Islamist-left collaboration among Morocco's excluded opposition." *Democratization*, 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1772236>.

¹⁰ The manuscript for this article was completed on 24 June 2020.

- a) The palace has reassumed leadership, mobilizing the Royal Armed Forces to reinforce the health system, promoting the creation of the Special Fund to alleviate the economic impact of the crisis, pardoning more than 5,000 prisoners on humanitarian grounds and ordering a mass testing campaign in the private sector. Mohammed VI has also ordered the repatriation of thousands of Moroccans trapped abroad after months of waiting and uncertainty. The heterogeneous coalition government once again seems like a mere manager and coordinator of an executive branch led by the monarch the pillars of which have resettled on the state security apparatus.
- b) The lockdown has particularly affected the most disadvantaged sectors (migrants, temporary workers and people with no fixed abode) and has exposed inequalities linked to informal employment, low-quality housing and poor health and distancing conditions in the workplace.¹¹ The aid distributed by RAMED does not seem to have been enough. Nevertheless, according to figures from the High Commissioner for Planning, 19% of Moroccans, around 4.5 million people, have received some form of aid to contain a social crisis sparked by the slowdown in economic activity.¹² However, the situation remains worrying: given the recession in Europe, the closure of activities in the domestic sphere and the urgent drought, the World Bank expects GDP to recede in 2020 (-1.7%).¹³ The economy will foreseeably suffer from the impact on exports and the declines in agricultural production, the automobile sector and tourism.¹⁴
- c) Morocco has presented itself as a responsible and safe country, a guarantor of the protection of its citizens (and of placing public health above

economic interests), capable of becoming an exporter of medical equipment and, therefore, a strategic trade partner. Embracing its new African role,¹⁵ it has sent healthcare aid to countries across Africa, strengthening its commitment to South-South cooperation. This threefold success (in security, trade and cooperation) stands in contrast to the criticism the country has received from the more than 28,000 Moroccans stranded abroad,¹⁶ whose repatriation did not begin until late May with the return of more than 3,000 people in mid-June.¹⁷

Conclusions

On the 20th anniversary of his ascension to the throne, Mohammed VI is seeking to renew his social support and present himself as a direct liaison committed to his people. Whilst the proposal for a new development model depoliticizes the political field in favour of technocratic knowledge, pressure on the regime has continued to grow since the repression of protests in recent years and the shifting of criticism to social media. The increased censorship and growing role of the security apparatus are symptomatic of the social crisis that the country is undergoing, as well as a response to the breakdown of the wall of fear amongst young people.

The management of the coronavirus in 2020 has revealed the robustness of the regime, which, with the support of the state security apparatus and a team of technocrats led by Mohammed VI, has imposed a harsh response to the pandemic that has allowed it to control its spread and cultivate a positive image at home and abroad. However, the COVID-19 crisis has also exposed its social vulnerability and external dependence, which, today, are one of the major challenges to the country's political management.

¹¹ ZAIREG, Reda. "Etat d'urgence en vulnérabilité sociale. Intensification des inégalités et aggravation de l'exclusion." 2019: <https://ma.boell.org/fr/2020/06/01/etat-durgence-en-vulnerabilite-sociale>.

¹² <https://aujourd'hui.ma/societe/hcp-13-des-menages-ont-recu-une-aide-dans-le-cadre-du-programme-ramed>.

¹³ www.worldbank.org/en/country/morocco/publication/economic-update-april-2020.

¹⁴ www.efe.com/efe/espana/economia/marruecos-cerrara-2020-con-los-peores-datos-economicos-de-este-siglo/10003-4219795.

¹⁵ GARCÍA DE PAREDES, Marta and TOMÉ-ALONSO, Beatriz. "Défection, prise de parole et loyauté: Incertitude et reconfiguration autoritaire dans le Maroc de Mohammed VI." *L'Année Du Maghreb*, No. 21, 2019. HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI, Miguel and TOMÉ-ALONSO, Beatriz. "The return of Morocco to the African Union." *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2017*, 2017.

¹⁶ <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-05-08/marruecos-elude-fijar-fecha-para-repatriar-a-sus-28000-nacionales-bloqueados-en-el-extranjero.html>.

¹⁷ www.afrik.com/maroc-mohammed-vi-et-le-rapatriement-des-marocains.