

# Morocco at the Crossroads: New Policies, Old Practices

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The year 2021 in Morocco has been dominated by two trends that have characterized Moroccan policy for the last decade: the entrenchment of the monarchy as the central piece of the political system, which rules and governs, with the consequent isolation of the country's representative institutions in political decision-making; and a more aggressive and confrontational foreign policy with regard to the Western Sahara issue.

## Ten Years After the Anti-authoritarian Protests in Morocco

“Freedom, dignity and social justice.” With this slogan, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in different cities throughout Morocco, coming together around the “20 February Movement,” which, in 2011, led in that country the anti-authoritarian protests taking place in countries across North Africa and the Middle East. Ten years on, Morocco is not only in the middle of an institutional crisis and a crisis of its development model, but has also taken an authoritarian turn, including a major backslide in terms of citizens' rights and freedoms.

Since the constitutional reform of 2011, which reduced the King's executive powers, the monarch has steadily regained his centrality in the political

system, whilst the government has seen its role eroded to that of mere manager of the actual decisions and orientations. The depoliticization of the political field and preference for technocratic policy management has been a constant in the last ten years, enabled by the gradual loss of power of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) over the last two legislative terms, despite its electoral growth. This centralization of power has not been devoid of risks, such as the subordination of political responses to the pace set by the monarchy or the decoupling of its decisions from any sort of popular pressure. As Zaireg (2018) notes, these dynamics have not had the desired effects: on the one hand, the monarch's decision to respond to the protests by launching long-term projects has proved insufficient, insofar as most of them remain unfinished and incomplete due to the lack of follow-through on their implementation; on the other, it is difficult to defend the idea of a monarch attuned to the concerns of his people when, even as he incorporates or embraces social demands, he is repressing or imprisoning the people who voice them.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last year, in the context of the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, the three aforementioned trends (royal leadership and institutional weakness, crisis of the development model, authoritarian regression) have become more evident than ever. On the one hand, the management of the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the robust leadership of the King, who did not hesitate to mobilize the armed forces on the ground and promote programmes aimed at mitigating the economic and social effects of the crisis and ensuring the effective purchase and management of vaccines. On the other hand, the pandemic

<sup>1</sup> ZAIREG, Reda. “Social protest in Morocco: Does Mohammed VI have a plan?” *Middle East Eye*, 2018. Available at: [www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/social-protest-morocco-does-mohammed-vi-have-plan](http://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/social-protest-morocco-does-mohammed-vi-have-plan).

exposed the fragility of the Moroccan health system, its poor funding, the shortage of medical personnel and of hospitals and intensive care units, as well as the disparities between the country's urban and rural areas in terms of the public health system's quality and accessibility.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the declaration of the health state of emergency allowed the Moroccan government to reinforce the regime's authoritarian drift and restrict citizens' rights and freedoms, repressing protests, as in Fnideq in February, with the excuse of forcing the population to comply with the imposed health measures.

### Western Sahara at the Centre of Moroccan Domestic and Foreign Policy

Western Sahara has occupied a central place in Moroccan policy throughout 2021, as a result of the diplomatic moves made over the previous two years, led by Nasser Bourita, Morocco's top diplomat and the right-hand man of King Mohammed VI, from whom he takes direct orders in foreign policy. Since taking over the Foreign Ministry in 2017, Bourita has spearheaded a dramatically more assertive foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> As a result, in 2020, more than twenty African and Arab countries opened consulates in Laayoune and Dakhla and, on 10 December 2020, the United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This recognition was the consequence of the Alawite kingdom's adhesion to the so-called Abraham Agreement, previously signed with three other Arab countries (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan), entailing the normalization of bilateral relations with Israel. The signing of this agreement triggered considerable unrest in Moroccan civil society and the non-governing left-wing parties, as well as amongst Islamist organizations, which viewed it as Moroccan disregard for Palestinian rights. Within Parliament, the party most affected by this diplomatic move has been the PJD, which has had to abide by the royal decision, even though

it meant contradicting its own positions regarding the Palestinian question and running counter to the widespread sentiment of its deeply anti-Zionist rank and file. For now, the normalization of relations with Israel involves three issues: the authorization of direct flights between the two countries; the reestablishment of official contacts and diplomatic relations whenever possible; and economic and technological cooperation, as well as the reopening of the Moroccan liaison office in Tel Aviv.

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The US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara marked a turning point in the international consensus on the non-formal recognition of Morocco's claims of sovereignty of the territory.<sup>4</sup> It has emboldened the country to take a stronger stance on the issue and to strain relations with other countries, especially the European Union, as much as necessary to convince them to join the US position. This aim of the Alawite monarchy has driven the growing tension, since March 2021, with other European states, specifically Germany and Spain. In the case of Germany, the disagreements are due to the confluence of several controversies (Morocco's exclusion from the international conference on the Libyan civil war, the broadcasting on German state television of a report on alleged human rights violations in Morocco) and the country's response to Donald Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and its request to the UN Security Council that the US respect the provisions

<sup>2</sup> ABOUZZOHOUR, Yasmina. "Policy and institutional responses to Covid-19 in the Middle East and North Africa: Morocco." Brookings Doha Center, 2020. Available at: [www.brookings.edu/research/policy-and-institutional-responses-to-covid-19-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-morocco/](http://www.brookings.edu/research/policy-and-institutional-responses-to-covid-19-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-morocco/).

<sup>3</sup> CASANI, Alfonso and FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, Irene. "Marruecos, una política exterior más asertiva." *Política Exterior*, 2021. Available at: [www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/marruecos-una-politica-exterior-mas-asertiva/](http://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/marruecos-una-politica-exterior-mas-asertiva/).

<sup>4</sup> FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, Irene. "Tropezando con la geopolítica." *Política Exterior*, 2021. Available at: [www.politicaexterior.com/marruecos-espana-tropezando-con-la-geopolitica/](http://www.politicaexterior.com/marruecos-espana-tropezando-con-la-geopolitica/).

of international law applicable to the dispute. These differences led, first, to a breakdown in the cooperation between the Moroccan government and the German Embassy in Rabat in March and, subsequently, to the recall of the Moroccan ambassador to Berlin for consultations in May. In the case of Spain, the trigger was the secret admission of the Front Polisario leader Brahim Ghali to a hospital in Logroño in April to be treated for the coronavirus. This prompted an unprecedented response by Morocco, which left the border with Ceuta uncontrolled, thereby facilitating the entry of between 12,000 and 14,000 migrants into the self-governing city between 17 and 20 May.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the specific case of Ghali, the Moroccan response of making such intense use of immigration as a tool for pressure and for protesting what Morocco considers “red lines” has been viewed as unacceptable by Brussels. Although the Alawite kingdom has sought to attribute the situation of migratory crisis to the deterioration of its relations with Spain, in an attempt to distance the European Union from the controversy, as of the writing of this article,<sup>6</sup> the European institutions have responded with a condemnation by the European Parliament of Morocco’s use of migrant minors as a weapon of political pressure. Whilst the new US administration has yet to make any statements regarding the continuity of the agreements established by Trump or on the diplomatic crisis, Morocco seems determined to maintain its firm commitment and break off bilateral agreements with the EU, as it did in 2016 and 2019 as a result of the judgments of the EU Court of Justice annulling the application of the agriculture, fisheries and aviation agreements between the EU and Morocco to Western Sahara.<sup>7</sup> This confrontational position is framed both within the defiant tone the country has adopted towards the EU in recent years every time it has perceived political interference by the Union in its internal affairs, including, of course, the situation in Western Sahara, and in the demand to be treated on equal terms and the diversification

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of Moroccan foreign affairs. However, this time the Alawite kingdom seems to have miscalculated the consequences of its geostrategic gamble, such that, whilst the political evolution of the crisis remains open, Morocco’s diplomatic debilitation may be counterproductive to its interests and future negotiations with the EU.

### 2021, the Electoral “Super Year”

The political autumn of 2021 will be marked by the holding of up to five electoral processes in the country, which will begin with the election of the members of the professional chambers (of agriculture, commerce, industry, crafts, services and fisheries) on 6 August. These professional chambers participate in the indirect election system for the House of Councillors (the upper house of Parliament), which is scheduled to be renewed on 5 October. In the interim between these two electoral processes, three other elections will be held, all on 8 September, in which Moroccans will be called to the polls to elect the members of the House of Representatives (the lower house of Parliament), the local councils and the regional chambers.

The organization of this electoral “super year” in Morocco has been preceded by a reform of the electoral law that has generated an intense debate in the country since March 2020, when the parties began to discuss its terms. Finally, on 6 March 2021, the Moroccan Parliament passed four organic laws that will be implemented in the next elections. With regard to the modifications made for the election of the House of Representatives, undoubtedly the

<sup>5</sup> “Cifran en más de 10.000 los marroquíes que ya han retornado a Marruecos desde Ceuta, 2.388 por voluntad propia.” Agencia EFE, 9 June 2021. Available at: [www.europapress.es/ceuta-y-melilla/noticia-cifran-mas-10000-marroquies-ya-retornado-marruecos-ceuta-2388-voluntad-propia-20210609195935.html](http://www.europapress.es/ceuta-y-melilla/noticia-cifran-mas-10000-marroquies-ya-retornado-marruecos-ceuta-2388-voluntad-propia-20210609195935.html).

<sup>6</sup> 10 June 2021.

<sup>7</sup> SUÁREZ-COLLADO, Ángela and CONTINI, Davide. “The European Court of Justice on the EU-Morocco agricultural and fisheries agreements: an analysis of the legal proceedings and consequences for the actors involved.” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917122.

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most controversial, the most important developments were the elimination of the electoral barrier (previously set at 3% for the legislative elections), the elimination of the 90 seats reserved for the “national list” and their distribution amongst the regional districts, and the modification of the electoral quotient. As for the latter, the system implemented in 2002, consisting of a proportional distribution by electoral list using a “greater remainder” method calculated based on valid votes was replaced by an electoral quotient to be calculated based on the lists of registered voters, whether or not they have voted. The approval of this change in how the quo-

tient is calculated was strongly opposed by the PJD, the majority party in the house and, foreseeably, the one that will be the most affected by this new electoral system. Officially, according to Minister of the Interior Abdelouafi Laftit, this change was made to strengthen political pluralism and competition between parties and promote greater representation. However, one cannot help but think that the reform was also driven by the desire to limit the Islamist party's power and reduce its weight in Parliament, as well as its ability to form a government. The new electoral quotient will mainly affect the majority parties, reducing their representation, and will generate a balkanized Parliament, which will likely weaken the parties in relation to the political decision-makers who are above the control of the government and Parliament. Thus, insofar as the King is responsible for appointing the head of government from amongst the party to win the most votes, a much more atomized and plural political map would increase the monarch's discretion regarding whom to tap to form a government.