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**Research Report**

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## Averting a Moroccan Revolution

The Monarchy's Preemptive Spatial Tactics and the Quest for Stability

Amin Alsaden

Morocco is often seen as the exception to the “Arab Spring”. The country's socio-political profile suggested that it was only a matter of time for the disgruntled masses to take to the streets and bring down another autocracy that has monopolised governance for decades and on whom the country's ills can be blamed. Contrary to expectations to date, however, Morocco' regime has survived the regional unrest, and its leadership seems to be as strong as ever. This is often explained with the promises of political reform that King Mohammed VI issued soon after regional uprisings started. This succinct narrative, albeit factual, does not accurately reflect the relationship between the resilient monarchy and the country at large. Other factors – particularly the regime's approach to the country's built environment, which encompasses the range of deliberately constructed physical structures: from inhabitable spaces to supporting infrastructure – can help explain the endurance of the inherited political status quo.

In Morocco, protests did in fact take place, as anticipated. The subsequently labelled “February 20th” movement succeeded in early 2011 in mobilising Moroccan citizens in dozens of cities across the country. The organisers' demands revolved around civil and political rights, and ranged from calls for increased freedoms, equality, and democracy, to putting an end to corruption and curbing police oppression. The demonstrators also raised more pragmatic concerns: making improvements to the education and health care systems; finding solutions to the housing problem; decreasing unemployment and protecting labour rights; and controlling price inflation of basic goods.

The movement touched sensitive nerves in the lives of many ordinary Moroccans, and acquired such a massive following, that, for a moment, the destiny of the regime seemed uncertain. But the growing momentum, and the popular excitement generated, soon dissipated after the King – days after the first organised protests broke out – stunned everyone by coming forward, acknowledging the demonstrators' demands, and promising substantial constitutional reforms in response. This move is often thought to represent the cunning ingenuity of Morocco's monarch and the *Makhzen* (the royal shadow government – an unofficial body of powerful loyalists who permeate all sorts of critical state organs),

who acted swiftly and pre-emptively to ward off any possibility of a serious revolt that may have jeopardised the regime itself.

### **Contingent reforms**

The distinct outcome of Morocco's "spring" to date is often explained by the fact that the King chose, ostensibly at least, to negotiate and make concessions. It was a stance that was taken to heart subsequently by the public – as evident in decreasing popular interest in later demonstrations, in anticipation of the promised reforms.

Morocco's revised constitution was finalised and released a few months later; upon closer reading, it gave observers many reasons to be cynical. The constitution articulates that the King remains the Commander of Morocco's faithful – a position that secures for the monarch the last word in religious matters and affords him control over Friday sermons at mosques across the country. Moreover, the King remains the head of the Supreme Ulama Council, presides over the Supreme Judicial Authority, and chairs the newly established Supreme Security Council, effectively controlling the military, security apparatus, and the country's intelligence force. In summary, the new constitution ensures that actual power ultimately remains in the hands of the monarch, while the elected government is expected to negotiate the political process and deliver on the public's expectations and demands.

Cynicism aside, the new constitution also introduces a series of reforms that are worth noting. It stipulates that the Prime Minister will no longer be appointed by the King at the latter's discretion, but is an elected public servant, who is endowed with the power to appoint members to key positions in the government he forms. Additionally, the new constitution recognises the freedoms of expression and demonstration. It commits to universal human rights, a free and honest electoral process, and equality between the genders. It promotes transparent and accountable

governance. And it promises that the state will do its best to provide decent housing, social security, modern education, access to health care, and employment opportunities to its citizens. The list of assurances can be criticised as vague, but the revised constitution does spell out noble ambitions, and describes a possible trajectory towards a transformed governance system with more democratic features.

This open-endedness is the very problem with the revised edition, however, as well as with the political analysis that credits it with the current stability of the country. The truth is, the new constitution is, at best, ambiguous about the issues that the February 20th demonstrators raised. It conveys many aspirations, but the government has yet to put in place the mechanisms and institutions that activate such language and turn it into reality. The outcome of the reforms will largely depend on the commitment of Morocco's principal political actors to its precepts, particularly the King and the *Makhzen*.

### **Shrewd spatial tactics**

The discourse around the main issues that the constitution promises to reform has been in circulation for several years, in fact, and did not come about as a result of, or a reaction to, the upheavals of the "Arab Spring". Neither were the protests of early 2011 the first challenge to the existing power structure. Prompted by the relaxation of authoritarian control and a limited opening of the political process that was initiated when King Mohammed VI took over from his father in 1999, a nascent civil society has negotiated its growth with the reforms previously advocated by the monarchy, gradually increasing public pressure. Several groups with diverse agendas have pushed for reforms on several fronts such as human rights, labour affairs, corruption, accountability, and inequality, among others. The discourse was only emboldened, however, and public mobilisation gained momentum following recent regional

events, particularly regime collapses in Tunisia and Egypt.

The recent constitutional changes should therefore be seen as a small step in a long process of contention. Privileging only political factors in understanding Morocco's equilibrium is clearly insufficient, particularly given the vague – and so far unsubstantial – fashion in which the new constitution addresses the expressed demands of both the populace and activists. An alternative hypothesis can be put forward: the Moroccan monarchy avoided the fate of other regimes in the region – and the tumult of the “Arab Spring” – through a process of reconfiguring and rebranding regime legitimacy and authority. This was achieved by not only introducing constitutional amendments that promised much needed reforms, but also by altering the country's built environment to stave off dissent and fortify the foundations of a carefully constructed stability. Morocco's built environment reveals premeditated and long-term-oriented intentions, with a political commitment to slower, and thus potentially more sustainable, reforms.

The country's built environment tells an eloquent story about the current state of affairs; the Moroccan regime has for several years been intelligently managing the built environment through a spatial approach that simultaneously emphasises tradition and modernisation. In other words, Morocco's contemporary delicate balance is the result of not only statements and decrees issued by the regime, but it also involves a host of long-term spatial tactics that touch the public in more immediate and palpable ways. A few examples from contemporary Morocco can illustrate this hypothesis.

### **Tradition**

Traditional built form is found throughout Morocco: the country's terrain is encrusted with historical gems – exquisite examples of indigenous architecture, sometimes encompassing entire *medinas* (old cities).

The Moroccan monarchy capitalises on this rich, readily available palette. It employs – in sync with the country's indigenous architecture – an elaborate system of state rituals and ceremonies, traditional fashion choices, titles and honours, among other strategies, all in order to preserve a constructed image in which the monarchy is not only inseparable from Islamic heritage, but also from the very historical foundations of Morocco. Tradition is indeed very much enshrined in the daily practices of the monarchy and the nation, constantly reiterating a stable and tenacious tie between the two.

The imperial cities – the old capitals of various Moroccan dynasties – play a significant role in this narrative. Marrakesh, for instance, has evidently been transformed recently, and its economy is becoming increasingly dependent on the hordes of tourists flying to its new Menara International Airport, arriving to experience the Maghreb's ultimate Orientalist spectacle. The old *Medina* has undergone a massive makeover, and many of the city's important monuments have either been, or are currently being, restored. Fes, on the other hand – known as Morocco's cultural and religious capital – appears to be stuck in history, with the city's vitality still revolving around its old *Medina*, where local authorities are aggressively implementing historical preservation projects with financial assistance from various foundations in the United States and the European Union.

The balance of traditionalism and modernisation is possibly most evident in Rabat, the seat of government. One of the most obvious orchestrated links to the past that the monarchy has attempted is at the site of Tour Hassan, a historical complex featuring a large incomplete medieval mosque and minaret. The modern mausoleum of Mohammed V and Hassan II – the current monarch's immediate ancestors – has been integrated into the complex in a gesture suggesting the seamless continuity of Morocco's royalty with the ancient, yet incomplete and ongoing, nation-building

project. The monarchy's role as both the custodian and ultimate arbiter of tradition in Morocco lends it not only renewed legitimacy, but also bestows it with the impression of permanence, much like the architecture it carefully preserves.

### **Modernisation**

Morocco's well-preserved landscape of tradition is increasingly being complemented by modern communication networks and new architecture. This carefully calibrated formula ensures that the country is modernised without upsetting the historical landmarks that constitute the backbones of its idiosyncratic identity. The formula recalls conventional nationalism discourse. A typical nation-building formula requires the state to diligently work on maintaining remnants of its history that prove continuity with the past and the inevitability of the current moment as the climax of a long national narrative. Concurrently, it connects the nation's disparate parts in an attempt to homogenise – and centralise access to – the citizenry.

Modernisation attempts are plentiful in Morocco and can be witnessed around major urban centres in particular. New motorways linking important Moroccan cities have been inaugurated in recent years. Most of the train stations in the large cities are either new or have recently been renovated. In Casablanca, a tram system is currently being constructed; another system, only one year old, is already operational in Rabat. An opera house is reportedly planned for in Casablanca. Substantial private investments can be witnessed in the many new buildings rising throughout the city and in major developments such as the Casablanca Marina. The first American-type mall has just opened, bringing international luxury brands to the city. This series of projects indicate healthy economic activity as well as considerable investment being poured into the country; the same projects are not devoid, however, of drawbacks and controversies.

Contemporary modernisation efforts can be categorised into either private or public enterprises, although the two spheres often overlap in Morocco, as the two worlds they describe are inextricably linked in a complex web of entrenched interests. When it comes to private investment, Morocco's relatively liberal economic policies have been a distinct feature of the state's interaction with the country's growth. Morocco, unlike many other Arab countries, hardly ever pursued a socialist model in which the state would preside over the most vital aspects of national development. This political approach is often reiterated – and was articulated once more in the 2011 constitutional amendments – in language that defines the role of the state as being more a facilitator than a direct provider when it comes to public goods and services. But to perceive that private investment is severed completely from public involvement in Morocco would be a misconception.

Even while disregarding the alleged extensive web of corruption and cronyism, which is said to guarantee dividends for political elites in every new private project that goes up in urban centres, the regime's vision influences private enterprises in various ways in Morocco. In Casablanca in particular – the country's economic heart and most populous city – the host of new buildings currently being constructed reveals a sense of optimism about Morocco's future prospects. Speculative private developers would not venture into such projects without risk calculations. Their current activity – in building various structures to international standards of quality – speaks to their belief in the stability of the current political system and their optimism about Morocco's foreseen future. Private investors are therefore deeply involved in the monarchy's development-oriented ambitions, successfully carrying out its vision for the country.

Most private development, however, is targeted at the country's wealthy; Moroccan diaspora wishing to own property back home; and foreigners, or others, who can

live up to the lifestyles afforded by the new resorts, hotels, and apartment buildings it is spawning. These projects stimulate the economy and provide employment opportunities for many Moroccan construction workers, but the luxury-driven investment climate often excludes the middle class from benefiting from, or inhabiting, the new structures. Although most of these projects are integrated into the city and not necessarily isolated into gated communities, they are financially and socially prohibitive to certain strata of the population.

If private developments constitute an indirect link between the state and the country's built environment, public investment highlights the more direct impact of state policies and demonstrates the regime's economic and political orientations in that environment. Most contemporary public works in Morocco come with a catch however. For instance, the new high-speed train system that the Moroccan government is building presents a perplexing paradox. The proposed system, based on France's TGV, which is being built and will be operated by French companies, is meant to connect Casablanca with Rabat and Tangiers, cutting current travel times by more than half. French involvement is only one of the reasons behind a big controversy surrounding the project: the King is said to have awarded this massive public works project to French companies as a political gesture in 2007. France's president at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, acknowledged the favour in 2011 during an inauguration ceremony by praising Mohammed VI's recent democratic reforms. The larger debate that the project raises, however, revolves around Morocco's need for such an investment. Large parts of the country, particularly the rural areas, where about half of the country's population lives, remain without train access or a basic road network, making the spending of a considerable percentage of Morocco's budget on a fast train system that improves upon existing links between major cities a question-

able choice. The use of such a large portion of the country's financial resources raises issues about spending in other areas where urgent investment is needed, such as in the health care and education systems. A campaign opposing the project, called "Stop TGV!", has garnered wide support among civil society groups within Morocco. The campaign criticises the logic behind the project and estimates that the sums invested in the new train system could have instead been utilised in building thousands of rural schools or dozens of hospitals. Above all – and despite the fact that the construction of the new system, as well as its later operation, creates job opportunities for Moroccans – the project should ultimately be evaluated by its purpose, or on the basis of who it serves. With ticket prices of the current train system considered rather expensive for a large percentage of Morocco's population, the new speedy trains will cater only to the upper class, or foreign tourists, putting further doubt on the wisdom of the government's investment.

Another example of public investment is Casablanca's new tramway system, which is lagging behind schedule. The construction of the system's first line – a 30 kilometre segment that links Casablanca's main neighbourhoods and serves a quarter of a million passengers daily – was supposed to be completed in 2010. Today, the new system draws a lot of complaints from locals because construction work has been going on for a long time, and because its dispersed nature has caused ongoing traffic jams due to the obstruction of several vital thoroughfares in the city's core. The project is stalled, according to interviewed Moroccan officials, because of political feuds. Apparently, different political actors – belonging to some 38 legally recognised parties – are sabotaging progress just so their opponents do not get the political boost that such an important project would bestow, not to mention the financial gains associated with its contracts. A similar story unfolded with the new opera house

proposed by Casablanca's mayor, resulting in the project never getting off the ground.

But despite the shortcomings to date, the tramway initiative promises to improve upon public transport in populous Moroccan cities, and to reduce people's reliance on taxis and private vehicles, both of which can indeed be positive outcomes.

Perhaps there is no other development that speaks to the monarchy's long-term intentions more eloquently than the inter-city road network that has been under construction for several years. New segments are completed every now and then; most notably, the Marrakesh-Agadir and the Fes-Oujda have been inaugurated recently, confirming the government's commitment to link major cities throughout Morocco with modern motorways. The national economic benefits of such a massive public works project are many, but the enterprise is not free of its drawbacks. Moroccan drivers with modest means, such as taxi drivers, complain that the tolls of the new motorways are too expensive. The same drivers also complain about the June 2012 hike in petrol prices – a strategy by the government to cut back on petrol subsidies for the rich, but which ends up affecting the poor primarily. These drivers prefer to use the old national road network, which remains toll-free, but which means considerably longer travel times, as their two lanes are often clogged with slow-moving trucks. Thus, the new roads mainly serve the wealthy (who mostly own private vehicles in any case), or those for whom it is economically viable to use, such as commercial drivers.

Furthermore, with the King's private investment firm controlling a considerable share in the country's cement industry, new construction projects – particularly the hundreds of kilometres of new roads – contribute significantly to the monarch's personal wealth, making him the key beneficiary of such projects. A WikiLeaks exposé, released months before the 2011 protests, accused Omnium Nord Africain, the King's holding company, of monopolis-

ing access to the real estate market in Morocco and coercing developers into granting beneficiary rights to the firm. If these allegations are true, most government public investments would, directly or indirectly, be advantageous to the royals before anyone else. The allegations also serve to illustrate the strong links between public enterprises, elite gains, and private investment – links that taint the otherwise potentially positive Moroccan modernisation efforts.

### **Inchoate vision**

As far as stabilisation of the political dynamic between the state and the public is concerned, the monarchy's spatial tactics have been successful to date. While tradition – and the implied association with the ancient monarchy – helps maintain the inherited status quo, modernisation gives the impression of progress, connects the country, and centralises the state's access to its remote parts. Such tactics amount to a comprehensive strategy on behalf of the state to control Morocco's built environment and to use the medium as a direct palpable link between the regime and the citizenry. This overall strategy – which serves to consolidate governance and contributes to the ongoing nation-building project – may not be articulated in a single official document, yet it is evident from a close observation of the state's multifaceted involvement in the country's built environment.

There is nothing wrong with preserving traditional architecture in Morocco, even though its main beneficiary is a regime that embraces its reiteration of advantageous historical narratives; the significance of historical structures representing the country's cultural heritage, as well as their continued utilisation by the public, justifies the care lavished on them. Modernisation efforts, however, deserve closer inspection. Most public and private investment is geared towards the upper crust of society, excluding a vast majority of the population, whose problems require serious and urgent

attention. Furthermore, the new architecture is actually highlighting the disparities that exist between the very wealthy and the vast poor population – a gap that has been growing wider. Although there has been a steady rise in GDP per capita since independence, with a substantial hike since Mohammed VI came to power, the Gini coefficient for Morocco has also increased over the years, indicating that as national wealth has gone up, so has income inequality. The old, dilapidated, poverty-stricken parts of the city can be seen today standing side-by-side with the new and luxurious parts, where the wealthy and foreigners can afford to live.

Most investment poured into the Moroccan built environment today is thus double-edged, and the monarchy's vision for the country, as detected from its development measures, is deficient and incomprehensive. It cannot be denied that such projects create jobs, save travel time, and improve environmental conditions – not to mention contribute to the larger ongoing political nation-building effort. But most modernisation initiatives are partial and selective, focussing on a particular stratum and serving highly specific goals, in apparent disregard to the pressing challenges facing the majority of the country's struggling population. Morocco continues to be plagued by dire illiteracy rates and a worsening education infrastructure, widespread poverty, high unemployment, and gender inequality, among other serious social issues. According to the United Nations, Morocco ranked 130th in 2011 among the world's nations in terms of human development, falling behind Syria and Egypt. The country is in desperate need of modernisation programmes that ensure sustainable development and that can touch a wider – underprivileged – spectrum of the population.

### **Precarious stability**

Some Moroccans predict that such a condition is not sustainable, while others claim that the country has always had

such disparities, that Moroccans are used to them, and that they are content with their individual plights. The 2011 protests show clearly, however, that a large swath of the population is anything but content. Seen against the backdrop of proliferating new infrastructure and building projects, the protests indicate that the "success" of the Moroccan path to regime reform may be in peril if it cannot deliver on social issues.

This potential failure needs to be juxtaposed with contemporary popular sentiment that favours stability. Many Moroccans are convinced that they are better off with the current regime rather than ending up with total chaos and an unknown future – a view that can be attributed to their observation of regional events, such as the Syrian uprising. This implies a decrease in internal pressure on the monarchy to live up to its promises, at least for the time being.

At the same time, however, a degree of popular defiance can increasingly be felt in Morocco, as many citizens take advantage of the government's leniency, believing that repression is something of the past. Still, the monarchy remains off-limits: it continues to be perceived as an integral part of the national and independence movements, as well as being an inseparable component of the country's history prior to French colonialisation. It is perceived as entrenched in the cultural and historical makeup of Morocco – a change to which is unimaginable for many. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was not a stated ambition of the February 20th movement to challenge the monarchy.

But despite the regime's survival and its positive popular perception to date, there are no guarantees for lasting stability in Morocco. The distinct combination of unaddressed social and economic grievances with just the right spark could yield a massive eruption that would topple any regime, and Morocco's is no exception.



## Conclusion and recommendations

The current situation in Morocco should be understood as an outcome of not only recent political and institutional dynamics, but also the result of a long process that involves a host of factors and encompasses many aspects of the nation's life – a prime representative of which is the built environment. In this, the monarchy has chosen a dual approach that supports tradition as well as modernisation. While private developments indicate independent investors' optimism about the stability of the state and the future prospects of the country, large-scale building projects highlight the government's investment priorities, provide an understanding of the regime's long-term vision for the nation, and furnish a veritable example of how the state physically interacts with the citizenry. Most modernisation efforts, however, benefit the wealthy minority and disregard the social problems of a wide swath of Morocco's population – an unsustainable *modus operandi* in the long run.

European and German policy makers should continue their reform-oriented approach in their relations with, and policies towards, Morocco. In addition to supporting overall stability in the country, this approach should ensure that the monarchy is held accountable for achieving its recently stated ambitions. While recognising the importance of large-scale public projects in attaining Morocco's nation-building objectives, European governments should exert political pressure on the monarchy to fulfil its promises and live up to the new Morocco described in the 2011 constitution.

This approach would emphasise the need to address the areas where Morocco requires assistance the most, the areas that the regime's current vision does not cover, and where its initiatives do not reach. Most importantly, European policy makers should consider urging the monarchy to undertake development programmes and offer to provide the necessary assistance. The benefits of these programmes should reach the general population and help to

ameliorate targeted social problems where intervention is much needed. Even though the new constitution reiterates that the Moroccan government is not a direct provider, European policy makers should encourage the Moroccan regime to engage directly in providing decent public housing, upgrade and expand on its education and health infrastructure, and build – or dedicate the spaces necessary for – institutes that can activate its envisioned reforms. Europe can share with Morocco its own long and well-established experience in these areas and help the country achieve results – even if only small prototypical public projects that can serve as development examples for the rest of the country, and perhaps the region.

The EU's approach should include, above all, providing knowledge, resources, and training to improve living standards, addressing the challenges of education and health care, and decreasing unemployment. The Moroccan government needs to especially be urged, and assisted, in order to improve education and vocational training to produce a powerful, self-sufficient labour force and a literate population that can interact with the political process. In this context, the EU should adopt more liberal travel policies for Moroccan citizens, allowing them increased access to Europe's education, and offering them opportunities to live and interact with European citizens. This may be one of the fastest and most efficient ways to train human capital in Morocco, and to implant awareness of the ways liberal democratic societies function. In summary, the EU's overall approach should endeavour to empower the Moroccan public gradually so that they can contribute effectively to their country and determine their own destiny.

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