

**Summary:** Because of its prompt reaction to the unfolding regional crisis, Morocco has been hailed in Western capitals as a “model” for the rest of the region. What is really happening in Morocco today and what is the Moroccan model, if any, about? Reforms are not new to this country. However, they are more akin to transitions than to an end-state, since they were essentially top-down reforms and did not fully integrate the political sphere. The Arab Revolutions, and the Moroccan case, argue for a profound shift in the way the world (and particularly the West) conceptualizes and engages the Arab World. Morocco could be seen by Western countries as the country in which to try out new models of engagement and recalibrate old partnerships. Morocco, in turn, will want new types of partnerships and development strategies.

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## What Moroccan Model? Moroccan Reform and New Regional Perspectives

by Oumhani Alaoui and Emiliano Alessandri

The Arab Revolutions of 2011 are shattering all established knowledge and clichés about a region considered by many to be the most autocratic in the world, the one most prone to terrorism, to religious fundamentalism, and characterized by an inherent resistance to change. Today, the Arab world is declaring itself a region that is young, tech savvy, brave, and hungry for jobs, social justice, and democracy. The Arab world is on the move. Yet, beyond the domino effect, the rising cost of lost lives and the economic crisis, there are country-specific reasons for these profound changes and the way each government and peoples handle them. Because of its prompt reaction to the unfolding regional crisis, Morocco has been hailed in Western capitals as a “model” for the rest of the region.

The Moroccan head of state, recognizing the legitimacy and the durability of the new demands, adopted a strategy that none of his Arab counterparts so far has. On March 9, 2011, in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and during the Libyan conflict, King Mohamed VI promised sweeping economic, polit-

ical, and constitutional reforms to a country that had not yet clearly begun to raise its voice. Nonetheless, on March 20, Moroccan civil society and individuals, led by the Mouvement du 20 février (an urban-based, grass-roots youth movement), demanded even greater economic and political reforms. How are these two founding moments to be understood? What is really happening in Morocco today and what is the Moroccan model, if any, about?

The question is complicated by the recent terrorist attack in Marrakesh, which claimed 16 lives, and was the second largest terrorist attack in the country after the one that hit Casablanca in 2003. Although investigations are still ongoing, this dramatic episode suggests further caution about notions of a “Moroccan exception” and makes a discussion of Morocco’s response to domestic and regional developments more compelling.

### A Prelude to Spring?

Structural reforms in Morocco predate the Arab Spring. Mohamed VI, son of King Hassan II, ascended

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the throne in 1999 and initiated a large reform program. However, these reforms were mostly in the societal, economic, and legal spheres. In 1999, he created a reconciliation commission (the IER) where political prisoners and their families were heard. This commission is unique in the Arab World. In 2005, his government developed a nationwide human development initiative (the INDH) with substantial funding and the mission to promote and sustain development throughout the country. In 2003, the King called for a reform of Family Law (the Moudouwanna). This legal reform changed the status of women and guaranteed women greater rights and equality with men. This reform too, though not yet reaching the goal of complete equality, is unique in this part of the world.

Public sector reform was also launched in this era. The governance structure of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was substantially transformed through a new division between ownership and management. In parallel, foreign companies were granted greater access to the Moroccan economy. Finally, the state initiated vast infrastructure projects: a massive rural electrification program, highways linking the isolated north to the main economic hubs and the peripheries to the centers, large ports, and new industrial and free-trade zones.

Reforms, therefore, are not new to this country. However, they are more akin to transitions than to an end-state, since they were essentially top-down reforms and did not fully integrate the political sphere. Good governance was understood as an operational matter and not as intrinsic to the reform-process. What the Arab Revolutions are changing is precisely the way a country initiates its reforms and manages the process of change: the call is for good governance and state-sponsored reforms through grassroots discourse.

## A New Governance Model in the Making?

King Mohamed VI's speech of March 9 articulated a reform strategy that is now organically integrating the political sphere. Yet this historic decision was seen by the people as enabling a totally new dynamic. The regime's call for democratization was met with vibrant and informed voices who demand a role in the process itself and are not satisfied with mere unilateral "concessions." Whereas the King announced constitutional reforms that would greatly diminish his executive powers, the creation of an Economic and Social Council to assist the government in

policy-making, and the launching of the Regionalization Program (which we will discuss more fully below), the "new citizens" demand to be actors, not just recipients, of change. They also ask for jobs, better health and education programs, social justice, and transparency. At the core of these heterogeneous demands is a fundamental realization: the right and the possibility for a happiness that is both material and based in justice and dignity.

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This type of engagement is as critical as the new political reforms announced by the King. It can be argued that proto-democratic principles and ideals have long been part of the Moroccan landscape and in Moroccans' dreams for themselves. Today, these dreams could become reality if the reform process is about participation as well as legal changes. It is precisely this dual reform process that integrates bottom-up demands in what would otherwise be a more traditional top-down approach to creating a new dynamic of and for change. It is too early to tell if it will crystallize as a new governance model for change acceptable to the Moroccan people and authorities alike. But if it were to take off, this new model can deeply transform our understanding of the way states and citizens engage each other not only in Morocco, but in the Arab world more broadly. Herein, perhaps, lies the so-called "Moroccan exception" — an exception that is, in fact, a work in progress.

## Some Challenges

The challenges ahead are great. Old practices and habits are hard to overcome. The Arab world is undergoing structural

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transformations at a critical moment in global history. Commodity prices are on the rise, food security is precarious, and societies around the world are protesting social injustice. Europe itself is weakened by its own economic crises and public policy failures. Today, many in Europe are questioning the EU's integrative policies and are growing wary of international engagement. Fear of others is permeating the public space throughout the region.

Such securitarian tendencies may also prevail in transitioning countries like Morocco. The recent terrorist attack in Marrakesh, if followed by other such events, could lead the country down a spiral of instability and violence that would be difficult for the Moroccan authorities to manage without securitizing the larger discussion on reforms. Pressing demands for social justice, health care for all, decent housing, a competitive education system, and the curbing of clientelism could become overwhelming for the state even if movements for change remained peaceful. Monarchies or autocratic regimes are based on the belief that unchallenged continuity is stability. Democracies (and democratic processes) force a profound shift in world-view: change is open-ended and results uncertain and often uncontrollable. As such, the state could be tempted to use force and repression. Populist policies could also become attractive as a way to appease the masses instead of addressing their claims.

On the other hand, the creation of a Human Rights' body, the liberation of political prisoners, the creation of a new code of governance and greater freedom of expression all point in the right direction. A national pact for social reconciliation could avoid the danger of populist witch-hunts; a formal acceptance of grassroots inclusion in constitutional reform proposals would open up long stifled spaces of debate and exchange and ensure best reform practices.

The June 2011 constitutional referendum will be a key moment in Morocco's transition. The way the constitutional reforms are written will shape their acceptance and the country's stability. The stakes are high, but there is a plethora of old and new actors who can contribute to make this event a true moment of participation as opposed to one of division. Therefore, though the challenges ahead are great and scenarios not set in stone, there is ground for optimism. Whether or not Morocco will become a model for others will depend on how the country with its many

moving pieces will perform as a whole in these testing times.

## National and Regional Opportunities

The Arab Revolutions, and the Moroccan case, argue for a profound shift in the way the world (and particularly the West) conceptualizes and engages the Arab World. Morocco has long been a solid Western ally. Its geopolitical strategy is loyalty towards long-standing Arab positions coupled with the will to engage with the West on issues of common concern. However, the West must today recognize that the Arab nations are more than their states or dominant political forces. In the case of Morocco, for instance, people are showing their willingness to work with the regime to broker change. The West must allow for these voices to emerge and not be taken in by discourses of fear and contagion. On the other hand, the Moroccan regime must be careful not to distance itself from its neighbors for fear of contagion, and instead positively engage transition governments in countries like Egypt and Tunisia. Indeed, recent calls and promises for reform in Morocco prove, once and for all, that Morocco is not "outside the region" and that it too is subject to regional dynamics, challenges, and opportunities. Morocco can do better if it stands out, as opposed to standing apart, in its region.

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Morocco could be seen by Western countries as the country in which to try out new models of engagement and recalibrate old partnerships. Morocco, in turn, will want new types of partnerships and development strategies. Indeed, its democratization process and the global economic crisis could actually be opportunities to experiment with innovative development models that are more

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integrative. The new EU neighborhood policy and the launching of the Moroccan Regionalization plan are two key opportunities for the construction of solid future partnerships and for the exploration of new modes of engagement.

The EU already sees Morocco as a trusted partner. It was the first southern Mediterranean country to be granted “advanced status” in its relationship with the EU. Today, the EU’s new neighborhood policy based on “more for more” (more democracy, more assistance) could be a valuable policy towards Morocco if developed with care and respect for Moroccans’ own ideals for themselves. As such, this new partnership should involve traditional concerns such as political and economic reforms as well as critical issues such as mobility, equitable development, and regional integration. Some of these new efforts could build on the initiatives already taken by the King.

## Morocco can do better if it stands out, as opposed to standing apart, in its region.

The King’s March 9 speech launched a far-reaching regionalization plan. Moroccan regionalization refers to the deconcentration and decentralization of its administration. It is chartered to enforce local governance and create the conditions for region-specific development projects. It is the backbone of the emerging Moroccan democratic model as the Kingdom sees it. As part of its new neighborhood policy, the EU could accompany Morocco in its regionalization plan and share its own know-how and experiences of regionalization and decentralization. The dialogue and cooperation among European regions played a critical role in the stabilization and development of Europe after WWII and the reunification of Europe after 1989. The Maghreb, one of the least integrated regions in the world, could perhaps develop partnerships at its regional levels without formally engaging central governments still reluctant to completely trust its neighbors.

Regionalism through regionalization will enable the rise of new political actors and strategies. A much needed détente between Algeria and Morocco could start from

the bottom up, later leading to a new political dialogue between the two governments, the opening of borders, and new economic partnerships. This would remove a big impediment to regional economic and political integration while allowing a new, more cooperative approach to long-standing bilateral disputes and regional issues.

### A Changing Morocco in a More Integrated Transatlantic Space

Morocco’s integrative political reforms and regionalization plan could also pave the way for innovative partnerships at the transatlantic level. As Morocco tries out new internal and international models and as the region moves and shakes, it is the Atlantic hemisphere that emerges as its expanded neighborhood. Africa, the Americas, and Europe are already bound together by historical legacies and growing economic interdependence. Can these realities translate into greater political dialogue in the new context?

Morocco’s connections with long-standing allies in Europe and North America and its new partners in the South Atlantic highlight the benefits that could be reaped from greater cooperation in the wider Atlantic space. Morocco could offer itself as a key focal-point in Africa for European and American nations. The discussion on reform could be part of a wider discussion on good governance and development not only in the Maghreb but in Africa more broadly. This engagement could be further triangulated with a transatlantic partnership with a country like Brazil, which is itself already deeply engaged in the African continent. In turn, West African nations would actively participate in and benefit from new types of alliances and partnerships. Food security, mining policies and partnerships, solar energy, and infrastructure projects facilitating inter-regional trade could all be areas in which this triangulation would succeed. From relationships mainly driven by economic advantage, these could over time become partnerships based on compatible development models and the sharing of broad political principles.

Brazil, under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was able to transform itself from a small regional power to one of the world’s most powerful economies. How could the Brazilian experience benefit Morocco? How could the growing economic partnership between Brazil and Morocco become the basis of a larger, more ambitious dialogue on economic and political development?

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Finally, migration is rewriting Europe's internal and foreign policies. The rising number of illegal migrants from North Africa along with internal skepticism towards integration and multiculturalism are dangerous ingredients for regional security. However, Europe could push forward and instead of a protectionist and xenophobic discourse, could promote the development of innovative youth policies that could benefit the young on both sides of the Mediterranean instead of stigmatizing them. These youth policies could be conceptualized with the United States, which is already convinced of their necessity, and with other American and African nations who would also benefit from such a fundamental policy shift.

Morocco must today explore new models of governance and partnerships to meet the economic and political demands of the population. The dynamism that Morocco has displayed in recent months is encouraging. Some of Morocco's initiatives, from a more participative reform process to regionalization, indeed hold the potential to make it a model for other countries. But the results are far from guaranteed. If there is such thing as a Moroccan model, it is something that is in process and more valuable for its potential than for its achievements so far.

## About the Authors

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