

Viewpoints
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Morocco: “Advanced Decentralization” Meets the Sahara Autonomy Initiative

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The pace of reform in Morocco has been extremely slow since the enacting of the new constitution. Yet, buried in the maze of reports and studies that accompany any change in Morocco, a significant development is taking place: the program of “advanced regionalization” promoted by the king is transforming the 2007 proposal to grant a degree of autonomy to the Western Sahara into a one-size-fits-all system in which all Moroccan regions would enjoy more self-government, with the Western Sahara treated like any other region.

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The pace of reform in Morocco has been extremely slow since the enacting of the new constitution, leading many to question whether the “third way” that Morocco touts as the successful alternative to the messy transitions in other Arab countries is a path to change or a stalling mechanism. In reality, reform continues in Morocco, although at a glacial pace. It unfolds over years, even decades, winding its way through a maze of royal commissions’ studies and reports, with long pauses during which nothing seems to happen, but in the end reappearing according to long-standing plans.

The slow and winding road toward decentralization in Morocco is an example of a slow, long-term process driven by the palace. It is also an example of how a change with considerable political implication – in this case the Moroccan position toward solving the problem of the Western Sahara – can be buried in an issue that lacks political appeal and has attracted little attention domestically or internationally. Slowly, Morocco is transforming its 2007 proposal to grant a degree of autonomy to the Western Sahara into a one-size-fits-all system in which all Moroccan regions would enjoy more self-government, with the Western Sahara treated like any other region. Indeed, Moroccan officials bristle with indignation at the idea that the “southern provinces,” as they call the area, might require special status. That, they argue, would never work – as if no country had ever granted special status to a region. The only concession is that “advanced decentralization” will first be implemented in the south.

Under the present decentralization plan, the Western Sahara will not even be a single region, but it will be broken up into three parts, one of which also includes territory that has always been part of Morocco. A purely internal Moroccan solution that does not involve negotiation with the Polisario Front that advocates self-determination for the Western Sahara, along with its Algerian backers, and a referendum will not satisfy the United Nations and will not settle the problem once and for all in the eyes of the international community. But negotiations on the autonomy plan remain stalled; in the meantime, Morocco is planning to create new facts on the ground, integrating the south into a new decentralized system. A new approach to the Western Sahara issue appears to be taking shape.

Discussions of decentralization and regionalization in Morocco date back at least to 1997, when a law was enacted dividing the country into 16 regions. The regions, as well as the provinces and the local governments under them, had limited power, with the chief executive of all units appointed by Rabat. Still it was a first step toward introducing a larger degree of local control, and the king made it clear that more steps would follow.

The regions were set up, but taking gradualism to a new extreme, the regime took no additional steps toward decentralization for more than 10 years. The overall plan for decentralization in fact received little attention, but Morocco tabled the autonomy initiative for the Western Sahara.

The issue of the Western Sahara, it will be recalled, started with the 1975 decision by Spain to relinquish control of its colony on the Atlantic to Morocco and Mauritania. Rather than holding

a referendum to allow the population to decide its future, as UN principles required, Spain transferred administrative control of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania. Mauritania eventually withdrew, leaving Morocco in control of a territory it had long claimed as rightfully its own. The nationalist Polisario Front objected to the annexation, proclaimed the formation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, and set up a government in exile in Tindouf, Algeria. Years of conflict ended in 1991 with a UN-negotiated ceasefire that left Morocco in control of the territory and the Polisario and tens of thousands of refugees in Tindouf under Algerian patronage. UN attempts to solve the problem have been unsuccessful, with the main obstacle being disagreement about who should be allowed to vote in a referendum.

After years of desultory negotiations, the king tried to break the impasse. In 2006 he revived the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS from the French name), and the next year he unilaterally proposed the Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Saharan Region, better known as the Moroccan autonomy initiative. The proposal calls for the region to exercise control over local affairs through an elected legislature and executive authority, while the central government retains control of foreign affairs, defense, currency, postal service, and religion. Details of the plan were to be negotiated at the UN and submitted to a referendum. Negotiations have failed thus far.

In the meantime, the king also revived the decentralization agenda. In June 2010, he announced the formation of an Advisory Council for Decentralization tasked with elaborating “the general concept for the regions.” The council presented its final report for “advanced decentralization” in March 2011, but the document received little attention: the Arab world was in the midst of multiple uprisings, and Morocco itself had seen large crowds in the streets of Rabat, Casablanca, and many other towns beginning on February 20. In the midst of momentous events, administrative decentralization in Morocco did not capture much attention. The issue on everybody’s mind, in Morocco and elsewhere, was democracy. Yet decentralization, not democracy, was the first issue the king discussed in the March 9 speech in which he announced that he would present a new constitution to the country, essentially taking the wind out of the sails of the demonstrations.

The report of the Advisory Commission for Decentralization that the king mentioned in the March 9 speech is an easily forgettable document, filled with rhetorical statements about partnership between the national government and local communities, integrated and balanced development, and local democracy. The report stressed the need to implement the project in a deliberate and gradual manner. It recognized that in the long run, advanced regionalization would require constitutional amendments but also suggested that the revision of some laws would suffice in the initial phase. The report then sketched a broad vision of what decentralization would entail.

The king’s March 9 speech was widely seen in both Morocco and elsewhere as a response to the demands of protesters, a politically astute means of pre-empting a popular uprising by promising reform from the top. The official version is different. The king was not giving in to demands from the street, but simply continuing with the implementation of its long-planned decentralization program. “My address today will concern the launching of the next phase of the advanced regionalization process...” the king declared at the outset. “Our ultimate objective is to strengthen the foundations for a Moroccan regionalization system throughout the

kingdom, particularly in the Moroccan Sahara provinces,” he continued. His announcement that a new constitution would be prepared, which received much attention in Morocco and internationally, was presented as part of the decentralization project, which received none.

In fact, decentralization was given short shrift in the new 2011 Moroccan constitution, with only 12 out of 180 articles devoted to the issue. Nor did the issue of decentralization receive much attention in discussions of the new charter. The issue on everybody’s mind was whether the king had given up any power and whether the cabinet and parliament would play a more autonomous role in decision-making. Yet, the king’s speech on decentralization and the embedding of a new system in the constitution were important: the king had started transforming the issue of Western Sahara autonomy into one of overall reform of the Moroccan system.

Since the king’s March 9 speech, decentralization has again receded in the world of commissions and studies, in keeping with the Moroccan habit of moving slowly and cautiously. In November 2012, the king repeated his commitment to advanced regionalization, “making sure that the Southern Provinces are given priority in this process.” At the same time, he called for the preparation of a regional development model. He gave the mandate for elaborating such model to the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC). In response, ESEC issued a “Concept Note” in January 2013 on a Regional Development Model for the Southern Provinces, reiterating commitment to advanced regionalization and to regional economic development and announcing the launch of yet another study, with interim reports to be completed in March and June, followed by a final report in October 2013.

The most notable development concerning decentralization at this point is the firm and clear rejection by the palace that the Western Sahara could be given special status in the project of regionalization. Questions on this issue are rejected by government officials, from diplomats to ESEC officials, as preposterous – all regions must have equal status, they argue, overlooking the fact that in the eyes of the international community the Western Sahara is still a disputed territory for which a special solution needs to be found. Morocco has not repudiated the autonomy initiative, but it appears to be grinding it down in the slow but inexorable march of the advanced regionalization glacier. Increasingly, Morocco appears to be transforming the Western Sahara issue from an international one (to be solved by negotiations over special status for the region, followed by a referendum) to a domestic one that would reform the local government system in the entire country.



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