



Debate

Regionalizing Morocco

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The Kingdom of Morocco is planning to regionalize, or transfer responsibilities and capacities (administrative, financial, and skills) from the capital of Rabat to sub-national levels. In regionalized (or decentralized) systems, all phases of development projects (from design through evaluation) occur closer to or by the beneficiaries themselves. Projects in education, job creation, and health, for example, are intended to respond directly to people's self-described needs, as local people democratically exercise control over their own affairs.

Because decentralization increases regional autonomy and self-reliance, Morocco's plan provides a framework that could potentially help resolve the Western Saharan conflict. Morocco proposed this arrangement to the United Nations Security Council in April 2007, and since that time, negotiations among the parties to the conflict have not led to a breakthrough. However, the proposal catalyzed momentum to resolve the dangerous conflict that prevents the Maghrib Union (including Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia) from substantial cooperation on security, pollution, immigration, development, and relations with other blocs of nations (such as the Euro-Mediterranean and Southern blocs).

What are the guidelines in Morocco's Roadmap to regionalization? Taken from public statements by King Mohammed VI since 2007, the plan presents a system that incorporates three distinct organizational arrangements of decentralization. It includes: 1) "devolution," or the transfer of power to lower-levels within ministries; 2) "deconcentration," or having sub-national civil, public, and private institutions work together while the national level contributes financially or know-how; and 3) delegation or the "participatory method," whereby, as the king explains, "citizens are the engine for and ultimate objective of all initiatives" (it is also "used to address the defining issues of the nation"). Participatory methods include information-gathering activities that engage entire communities in dialogue as they conduct their own analyses toward creating action plans for projects that reflect their priorities.

The three arrangements combined create a Roadmap formulated to advance community-driven development, assisted by sub-national government, civil, and private partnership, and with support from the national level. The model functions to mobilize national resources toward locally managed projects that are identified in participatory democratic processes. The Roadmap necessitates, as it should, people's direct participation in decisions to enable their ownership of projects and a stake in the new system. Without this, it is highly improbable that a sustainable regionalization can be achieved in the Sahara or elsewhere.

The level of success of Moroccan regionalization, however, will largely depend on which sub-national tier will be the greatest beneficiary of Rabat's transfer of authority to plan projects, approve budgets, and apply capacities to implement development and change. In Morocco, the sub-national tier best positioned and able to create the most broad-based participation is the communal level – the most local administrative tier. The kingdom is made up of approximately 1,500 communes, each with an elected assembly of officials. Their Charter already requires community participation in the creation of development plans that are sent to the ministries of Interior and Finance. Training assembly members in applying participatory methods, and giving budgetary priority to communities' identified projects, will create a regionalization able to establish projects aligned with people's self-interests. Later, if necessary, recentralizing certain management responsibilities from communes to a higher sub-national tier could always be done if problems of coordination emerge, for example.

As Morocco more specifically defines its regionalization, it appears instead that the provincial and regional levels will be the primary centers of decision-making authority. However, Morocco is considering increasing the numbers of provinces (currently at 48) and regions (16), which would relatively lower the populations of these jurisdictional units in order to better enable institutional responsiveness to local people. More and smaller provinces and regions, combined with operationally empowered communes, would provide optimal conditions for regionalization in Morocco. However, there is not a substitute for the communal level in terms of opportunities to facilitate people's participation, and, for that matter, informing discussions surrounding new jurisdictional borders. For instance, local people in two adjacent communes in the High Atlas Mountains explain that their accepted border (also a provincial border) was settled in the past when two people began walking at dawn from the far end of each commune toward each other, and where they met became their boundary. Communes applying participatory methods would generate vital information for more sustainable regionalized planning, and that could help avoid potentially major problems in the future.

The Kingdom of Morocco has staked advancing its vital interests on regionalization. The bond between the people and the kingdom will be strengthened in regionalization when the communal level is emphasized.

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