



# The decentralization of a monarchy

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In a speech on Nov. 6, 2009, King Mohammed VI of Morocco stated his intention to press ahead with decentralizing the kingdom, and that the "Saharan provinces" will be among the first regions to experience its benefits.

The date marked the 34th anniversary of the Green March, when 350,000 unarmed Moroccans crossed into Spain's former Sahara colony, now internationally referred to as the Western Sahara, to reassert the kingdom's historic ties to the region. Since then, an ongoing territorial dispute has pitted the region's Polisario independence movement, backed with arms and financing by neighboring Algeria, against the central government in Rabat.

In Marrakech, a few days before the king's announcement, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated the U.S. government's support of Morocco's position, and stated that its plan for the resolution of the conflict is "credible."

Decentralization offers a potential means of conflict resolution by providing sub-regions with autonomy, responsibility, and capacities to advance the empowerment of development, all of which can have a stabilizing effect. The guiding principle is that decentralization creates national unity, or at least greater levels of peace, by way of enabling increased levels of regional diversity and determination.

The history of the United States offers examples of how federalist-decentralized systems can function both to mitigate and exacerbate regional tensions. Federalism initially enabled conflicts to be overcome among northern and southern states during the founding of the United States, conflicts that might otherwise have prevented the country's formation. However, decentralization may also be a cause for conflict if it is used to enable secessionist movements, which also tragically occurred in the United States.

King Mohammed VI is mindful of this potential danger of decentralization, and he stated that the process of decentralization and the strengthening of national solidarity must go "hand in hand." This is one essential reason why the king called for a "gradual" decentralization process.

The way decentralization is implemented will decide if it generates the needed trust and ushers in a new period of lasting peace and greater prosperity. If it successfully resolves the Western Saharan conflict, decentralization would also remove the greatest obstacle preventing strong collaboration among the Maghreb Union -- a regional bloc that includes Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.

In the context of the Western Sahara, it would be prudent to devolve government responsibilities as locally as possible because that will likely be perceived by the people of the region as a more-heightened level of autonomy, which will, in turn, build further trust. It is also important that the people and institutions of the region become engaged with and receive benefits from decentralization as soon as possible so that they develop a stake in the system and therefore seek to maintain it.

The king often emphasizes utilizing the participatory method toward decentralization. The participatory approach involves direct engagement of the people in managing their own development and social affairs, instilling in them a sense of control and ownership of issues they deem important. In the Western Sahara, local people would see that the region's future depends on and reflects the decisions that they make.

Western Saharan public and private institutions should be identified that can be effective vehicles for transferring skills related to facilitating participatory development to its members. For example, members of indigenous civil associations dedicated to local development ought to be targeted to receive training. The more widely these essential skills are dispersed, the more likely development that meets the self-described needs of the people will occur and decentralization will have the chance to succeed.

Decentralization along the lines that Morocco's king enumerated will require reforming the Ministry of Interior, whose purpose is the internal security of the nation. First, as the registering agency, it can play a major role in the building of institutional partnerships by making available to the public, via the Internet, the contact information of the tens of thousands of nonprofit Moroccan associations, broken down by region and mission category. Second, protocols requiring notification of the Ministry of Interior of local community planning meetings and project implementation activities should be phased out. Finally, a review of ways the Ministry of Interior can use its network to assist local and regional development should be a high priority.

A decentralization agency as part of the palace administration would help build productive institutional partnerships, within government and among all sectors and levels. Observers have suggested that the king's greatest challenge is to guide the transition toward decentralization. An agency within the Royal Cabinet would create the strategic position for that purpose.

Morocco's successful decentralization could create historic opportunities for the nation and the region. By fulfilling the political, social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspirations of its population, it could also result in the most viable conditions for ending the conflict of the Western Sahara to date.

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