



Morocco and the 2011 election

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Morocco holds an important parliamentary election on 25 November. Under constitutional reforms proposed by the King, Muhammad IV, parliament will gain significant new powers.

Contents

1	Political reform and human rights	2
	The election	4
2	Economy	4
	Trade with the UK	4
	Standard of living	4
3	European Union	4
4	Western Sahara	5
5	The Maghreb	7
6	UK-Morocco bilateral relations	7
	Arab Partnership	7
	Judicial cooperation	8
	Intelligence cooperation	8

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1 Political reform and human rights

The reforms in Morocco should be seen in the context of the gradual opening of the country's political system since the beginning of the rule of Muhammad VI in 1999. The first election since his accession, held in 2002, were the fairest and freest the country had ever seen. Human rights institutions were strengthened, an arbitration body was established to determine compensation for the families of opposition figures who had "disappeared" and thousands of prisoners were amnestied.



Map courtesy of University of Texas

The King also introduced an important programme of social reforms, the most important of which would lead to a marked improvement in the position of women, notably the allocation of a third of parliamentary seats to women. The officially recognised Islamic party, the PJD (Parti de la Justice et du Développement) and the banned al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity Movement) organised a demonstration against the gender equality reforms in Casablanca, which was attended by hundreds of thousands.

Press freedom, though improved under the new King, was far from complete. Coverage of the monarchy, the army and the Western Sahara dispute were still subject to strict controls.

At the 2007 election, turnout fell to 37%, indicating public disenchantment with the reforms offered by 'M6' and the political system. Nepotism and corruption among the associates of the royal family are regularly blamed for this. A US diplomat's comments, revealed in the Wikileaks diplomatic cables, described the "appalling greed" of those close to King Muhammad while another cable said that "corruption is present at all levels of Moroccan society".¹

Resentment at economic unfairness and political exclusion brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets in Morocco in the spring of 2011. Although calls for the "end of the regime" were less widespread than in other countries, there was no mistaking the force of the public desire for meaningful reform. Although the response was mild by the standards of some countries, police broke up demonstrations using armoured vehicles and causing injuries to members of the public.

In March the King announced a reform programme and, unlike some other regional leaders, he appeared to be serious about implementing real change. In June the King made a major speech in which he pledged that the majority in parliament would have a right to nominate

¹ "WikiLeaks cables accuse Moroccan royals of corruption", *Guardian*, 6 December 2010

the prime minister and that the prime minister would have the power to dissolve parliament. Nominating prime ministers and dissolving parliaments were two of the ways in which the Moroccan monarchy has maintained almost absolute control over the government. The proposed new constitution establishes human rights as core principles, gives the widely-spoken Berber language official status, promises freedom of religion and calls for gender equality.²

Commentators describe the move as probably the most impressive reform response to the Arab unrest:

In a season of growing disillusion—and disastrous televised speeches—the king of Morocco's June 17 national address stood out. It wasn't a great speech, and it fell well short of protesters' demands. But it was a substantive engagement with the opposition. The 47-year-old monarch did not demean his own people or place the blame on foreign conspirators. Instead, he announced a new constitution—one that has the potential to reshape the country's politics.³

A referendum was held on 1 July, at which the public expressed strong support for the changes, voting 98% in favour in a turnout of 70%, according to the Moroccan authorities. Both figures are surprising given the apathy shown in the 2007 election. The main political parties, including the independence-era Istiqlal, the Islamists of the PJD, and the USFP socialists, had urged their supporters to vote in favour.

As the election approaches, opposition to King Muhammad's plans may be growing more vocal. There have been weekly anti-government demonstrations in cities across Morocco for some months, and the weekend of 19 November was the last opportunity before the election planned for 25 November. It is reported that 3,000 demonstrated in Rabat and 4,000 in Casablanca.⁴ The February 20 movement, which led street protests earlier in the year, is calling for a boycott of the vote, saying that the reforms do not do enough to reduce the executive power of the monarchy. There is also criticism that there is not enough in the reform process to tackle corruption, one of the biggest public concerns. While an anti-corruption institute has been set up, its investigatory powers and its sanctions are seen by some as inadequate.

While the reforms are promising, Anouar Boukhars and Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution have pointed out that better democracy depends on a more democratic culture, and that this can be encouraged by western engagement:

Constitutions matter, but what matters more is what people do with them.

This is where Morocco's friends in the west come in. The time for prioritizing economic liberalization at the expense of democratic reform is over. While Morocco may be more "progressive" than most its neighbours, it is still a state that relies on political restrictions and repression, albeit with a subtler touch. The United States and the European Union should stop heaping praise on Morocco for being a model of reform it hasn't yet become. American and EU policy must be re-oriented to focus on a number of critical priorities: freedom of association and speech, constraining the powers of the king and the makhzen (royal court), and strengthening the role of elected institutions, such as parliament. Meanwhile, economic aid, as the new European Neighbourhood

² "A very small step", *Economist*, 9 July 2011

³ Shadi Hamid, "The Monarchy Model" *Slate website*, 1 July 2011

⁴ "Election 2011: Final Pre-Polls Protest Repeats Call for Moroccan Vote Boycott", *IHS Global Insight*, 21 November 2011

Policy states, must be linked to the idea of “more for more” with “precise benchmarks and a clearer sequencing of actions.”⁵

The election

The election to be held on 25 November 2011 was brought forward by almost a year as part of the government’s attempts to defuse the opposition movement. Opinion polls are not allowed, and the proportional representation system means that many parties are represented in parliament. The mainstream Islamist PJD is reported to be confident of a strong showing, especially following the victory of al-Nahda (or Ennahda, as it is pronounced) in Tunisia. According to one report, the Moroccan authorities are hoping for a substantial vote for the PJD which, they hope, will lend credibility to the election. Participation in the new government would be a first for the PJD, which has never been allowed to join the government before. According to the report, government-controlled media are not running negative stories about the party, as is their usual practice.⁶

2 Economy

Trade with the UK

The British Embassy in Rabat provides the following summary:

The UK was Morocco’s 10th supplier in 2007 and 9th in 2008; the UK retained its position as Morocco’s third customer in 2006 but dropped to 4th rank in 2007 and 7th position in 2008 (Morocco Exchange Office figures) with higher exports to India and Brazil .

Overall trade between Morocco and the UK in 2008 totalled £925m against £753.4m in 2007 and £671 in 2006. UK trade with Morocco was at its highest in 2008, with UK exports to Morocco totalling £485 million, a significant increase of 55% on 2007 which amounted to £313.4 million. This makes Morocco the UK’s leading export market in the Maghreb (North Africa) and one of the top 8 in the whole MENA Region for 2008.⁷

Standard of living

According to the World Bank ranking, Morocco’s per capita gross national income, adjusted for purchasing power, is \$4,560 per year, putting the country in 142nd position out of 213 countries. That makes the average Moroccan somewhat poorer than the average Sri Lankan and slightly richer than the average Indonesian.⁸

Official statistics on the cost of living (and international comparisons) in Morocco are not available but the country is considered by the [IMF](#) as one of “low inflation”. Inflation has averaged around 2% per annum since 2000,⁹ the same as the latest estimate for inflation during 2010.¹⁰

3 European Union

Morocco has an Association Agreement with the European Union. The agreement came into force in March 2000 and provides for free trade in industrial products and other economic cooperation. The agreement also provides for regular dialogue at ministerial and senior

⁵ Anouar Boukhars and Shadi Hamid, “Morocco’s Moment of Reform?”, Brookings Institution, 28 June 2011

⁶ “Morocco’s Islamists may bolster next government”, *Boston Globe*, 22 November 2011

⁷ UK in Morocco website, [HCountry information](#)

⁸ [HGross National Income per capita 20H10](#), World Development Indicators database, World Bank, 1 July 2011

⁹ [HWorld Bank](#)

¹⁰ [HAfrica News](#)

official level between the EU and Morocco on matters such as democracy and freedom of speech. There is also an important chapter in the agreement that deals with migration. More information on the agreement is available on the EU External Action Service website [here](#).

4 Western Sahara



Western Sahara is a former Spanish colony situated to the south of Morocco whose future has been uncertain since decolonisation. While Spain promised to hold a referendum on the region's future, this was blocked by the United States and France, for fear of the leftist Polisario Front gaining power. Morocco assumed de facto control of the territory, and armed conflict between the Polisario and the Moroccan armed forces ensued.

A ceasefire was agreed in 1991, including an agreement on holding a referendum on the future status of the territory.

Map courtesy of University of Texas

Sporadic negotiations were held under UN auspices, but the participation of Moroccan settlers, who moved into the area with Moroccan Government encouragement from the 1970s onwards and who now constitute a majority, has prevented agreement on the conduct of the referendum, which has been mandated by the United Nations.

The United Nations has a mission to Western Sahara: MINURSO, mandated by UN Security Council resolution 690 of 29 April 1991. The most recent UN Security Council resolution on the dispute, Resolution 1920 (2010) was passed on 30 April 2010. It can be accessed [here](#). It authorised MINURSO deployment until April 2011. See the mission's website [here](#). MINURSO has a peacekeeping force that monitors the Berm or wall that separates the Moroccan-controlled part of the territory and the largely uninhabited part controlled by the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (the Polisario Front).

A census, planned for 2000, to establish the basis for the referendum, was abandoned due to lack of agreement. In 2007, Morocco made a serious attempt to move negotiations forward by offering autonomy to the territory, under Moroccan sovereignty. Previously, Morocco had recognised no difference between Western Sahara and any other part of Morocco. The offer remains unacceptable to the Polisario.

In 2009, Peter Van Walsum, the then UN special envoy for Western Sahara, was replaced after he angered Polisario by stating that independence was an unrealistic option. The new envoy, Christopher Ross, was appointed in January 2009. He has recently described the present situation as “untenable” and has called for negotiations “without preconditions [and] in good faith” to find a mutually acceptable and lasting solution that would lead to self-determination for the Sahrawi people.¹¹ The replacement of Mr Van Walsum by Mr Ross suggested that there was still some resistance in UN circles to recognising Moroccan sovereignty.

In October 2010, *al-Jazeera*, the Qatar-based satellite news service, was banned from operating in Morocco after the Moroccan authorities said that it had “seriously distorted Morocco’s image and manifestly damaged its interests, most notably its territorial integrity”.¹²

In November 2010, protests erupted and turned violent, leaving between nine and 11 Moroccan security officers dead and two civilians. There were rumours of a massacre by Moroccan security forces, but there is little evidence to support this so far, despite stories in the Algerian and Spanish press. Moroccan forces did arrest and beat several Saharawis in retaliation. It was the worst violence in Western Sahara for decades. Morocco subsequently broke up a protest camp near the city of Laayoune.¹³

Shortly after the disturbances, representatives of the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front met under UN auspices in New York, observed by officials from Algeria and Mauritania, met to try to find a solution. The talks ended in failure, with participants only able to agree to hold further talks in 2011.¹⁴

Eight rounds of talks have taken place between Morocco and the Polisario Front since 2007, brokered by UN Special Envoy Christopher Ross. The latest was in July 2011 but it did not result in progress. In a statement after the talks, Christopher Ross said:

In order to find a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara [...] the parties continued to deepen their discussions on the two proposals, including the issue of the electoral corps, mechanisms for self-determination, and the forms of guarantees. By the end of the meeting, each party continued to reject the proposal of the other as the sole basis for future negotiations, while reiterating their willingness to work together to reach a political solution in conformity with the pertinent resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.¹⁵

The Polisario representative, Ahmed Boukhari, says that since July, Morocco has acted to “block the scheduling of further rounds of informal talks”, citing the forthcoming Moroccan parliamentary elections.¹⁶ The regular six-monthly report on talks was discussed at the UN Security Council in October 2011. Some have said that it is too low on the Security Council’s agenda.

The UK government’s position was set out recently in answer to a Parliamentary question:

¹¹ “Status quo in W. Sahara 'untenable': UN envoy”, *Agence France Presse*, 18 October 2010

¹² “Morocco: Ministry bans al-Jazeera for 'damaging' coverage”, *Guardian*, 30 October 2010

¹³ “Morocco breaks up protest camp”, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 November 2010

¹⁴ “Talks on Western Sahara's future run into the sand”, *Financial Times*, 28 December 2010

¹⁵ “HParties to Western Sahara conflict conclude informal talks in New YorkH”, UN press notice, 22 July 2011

¹⁶ “Morocco-Polisario talks hit dead end”, *Agence France Presse*, 26 October 2011

The UK supports the UN Secretary General and his personal envoy, Ambassador Christopher Ross, in their efforts to find a negotiated political settlement, providing for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. As set out in Security Council Resolution 1871, we regard the Moroccan Autonomy Plan as a serious and credible contribution to those efforts.¹⁷

Some say that real independence is not an option for the territory: the realistic options being for an autonomous region within Morocco or an Algerian satellite state. The US and France are said to argue this in private and to support regional autonomy within Morocco. The official British position follows the UN's: that the territory is disputed and its status is undetermined. The British embassy in Rabat, Morocco, handles questions about Western Sahara.

5 The Maghreb

The dispute over Western Sahara has a serious affect on relations with neighbouring Algeria, which has supported the Polisario against Morocco; indeed many see the Western Sahara conflict as a “cold war” between the two countries. The border between Algeria and Morocco has been closed since 1994 and trade between the two countries is minimal: a severe constraint on economic growth in the region. The dispute has also hindered the development of the Arab Maghreb Union trade agreement.

This leaves the Maghreb economies too dependent on the EU, which accounted in 2010 for 60% of Morocco's exports, 80% of tourism revenues and 90% of emigrant workers' remittances. If the EU were to return to recession, Morocco and other Maghreb countries would be very seriously affected.

Maghrebi governments could also do more to cooperate on other matters such as counterterrorism, border control and narcotics and smuggling. In November 2011, Algeria and Morocco met on the fringes of an Arab Turkish meeting and pledged to do more to cooperate and re-invigorate the Arab Maghreb Union project.¹⁸

6 UK-Morocco bilateral relations

Arab Partnership

The UK supports Moroccan projects to the tune of £540,000 under the auspices of the Arab Partnership.¹⁹ This makes Morocco's the third largest country programme in the partnership, after Egypt and Tunisia.

List of Arab Partnership projects in Morocco

- British Council & Chatham House: Establishment of a Young Arab Researchers Network to help ensure that young people play an effective role in policy formulation
- Search for Common Ground: Strengthening the Moroccan Ombudsperson's Office
- Collectif Democratie et Modernite: Stengthen safeguards for freedom of thought, conscience and expression
- Forum Des Alternatives Maroc: strengthening legal basis of citizens' right to direct participation

¹⁷ HL Deb 26 October 2011, c171-2WA

¹⁸ “Algeria, Morocco Strengthen Relations”, *Eurasia Review*, 20 November 2011

¹⁹ HL Deb 8 November 2011, c29WA

- UNDP: Technical assistance to strengthen the Government of Morocco's capacity to implement the provisions of the UN Convention Against Corruption²⁰

Judicial cooperation

Baroness Neville-Jones, the then security and counterterrorism minister, visited Morocco in 2010 to discuss enhanced judicial cooperation between the two countries. On 24 September, William Hague and Taieb Fassi Fihri, his Moroccan counterpart, signed a Memorandum of Understanding on deportation on the grounds of national security.²¹ The Home Secretary made a statement to the House:

Copies of the memorandum of understanding have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website.

There are a number of outstanding elements of the arrangement which UK and Moroccan officials are continuing to negotiate, along with a number of other judicial agreements and arrangements. We will publish further details when this process is complete.

The Government are committed to strengthening our bilateral relationship with Morocco across a range of fields, including measures to combat the shared threat from terrorism.²²

Intelligence cooperation

Western countries have relied heavily on intelligence cooperation with the governments of North Africa. Some say that this is threatened by the political developments. A noticeable drop in the flow of intelligence has been reported recently, particularly from Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya.²³

Morocco is not singled out as a country that is becoming more reluctant to cooperate; it is seen as a staunch ally of the west. However, the Moroccans are alleged to have participated in the extraordinary rendition programme said to have been run by the US authorities. Binyam Mohammed, the British resident and former inmate of the Guantánamo Bay camp, says that he was taken to Morocco in a CIA plane with British knowledge and tortured there for 18 months.²⁴

Intelligence cooperation with Morocco may be holding up well at present, but if a democratic government is installed in the country, policy may change.

²⁰ British Embassy in Morocco website, [HUK Arab partnership](#)

²¹ [HMemorandum of understanding on co-operation between the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco and the Government of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning persons subject to deportation for reasons of involvement in terrorism](#)H, Home Office, 2011

²² HC Deb 8 November 2011, c14WS

²³ "Arab Spring and the Mukhabarat moment", *The Middle East*, 1 November 2011

²⁴ "No action against UK spy over torture claims", *Reuters*, 17 November 2010