



AN EYE ON MOROCCAN DEMOCRATISATION: TOWARDS AN ADAPTATION?

Aisha Kadaoui

About the Author



AISHA KADAoui

Dr. Aisha Kadaoui is a Moroccan political scientist and constitutional law scholar whose work focuses on constitutional reform, democratic transitions, and governance in Morocco and the wider Maghreb. She earned her doctorate in Public Law from the Hassan II University – Casablanca, where she also teaches Political Science and Constitutional Law at the Faculty of Law & Social Sciences. Her research examines the interaction between legal reform and enduring power structures. She is a fellow in the Demos Arab Democratic Sustainability Forum in Tunisia /Maghreb.

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Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5F,
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku
Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Tel. +81-3-3356-5481
Fax. +81-3-3356-5482
Email: contact@toda.org

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Executive summary

This policy paper evaluates the implications of Morocco's political trajectory, arguing that it represents a form of adaptive governance rather than substantive democratization. It highlights Morocco's specific model of managed pluralism, in which periodic multiparty elections function within a system of controlled pluralism. The analysis demonstrates how the democratic process operates within a specific architecture, characterized by the structuring of the margins of political competition and the centrality of the monarchy. Rather than a simple constraint, this dynamic ensures that partisan activity functions within defined perimeters of regime stability. Consequently, democratic mechanisms often serve less as vehicles for radical contestation than as tools for maintaining institutional continuity and legitimacy.

The paper further analyzes the reconfiguration of the political landscape, specifically the consolidation of the National Rally of Independents (RNI) as the country's 'quasi-ruling party'. This development illustrates the deepening alignment between administrative power, economic elites, and electoral politics.

The policy paper concludes with several recommendations

1. Restore political legitimacy and trust: Public authorities must address the structural crisis of representation by moving beyond technical proceduralism. This involves rebuilding the broken link between citizens and representative institutions to counter widespread disengagement.
2. Reopen the political space to autonomous participation: Rather than managing dissent through co-optation, the state should ease legal and administrative constraints on political parties, trade unions, and civil society, allowing for a genuine re-politicization of the public sphere.
3. Enhance electoral credibility: Electoral governance must evolve from merely ensuring procedural regularity to guaranteeing the credibility of political competition, particularly in a landscape where partisan mediation has been significantly weakened.
4. Recalibrate external democratic support: International partners should acknowledge the crisis of the Western normative model and move away from rigid democratic conditionality and normative prioritization. Instead, they should adopt an adaptive approach that supports long-term institutional learning and recognizes the specific historical and societal realities of Morocco's governance.

Introduction

Since the constitutional reforms of 2011, Morocco's political trajectory has been characterized by a paradox: the expansion of formal democratic institutions has coincided with a narrowing of substantive political space. While the state has successfully maintained constitutional regularity, holding periodic elections and maintaining a multiparty parliament, these procedural markers effectively conceal a deeper trend of political centralization. This policy paper argues that this configuration should not be viewed merely as a failed transition, but rather as a successful case of adaptive governance, where democratic mechanisms are repurposed to preserve the centrality of the state and the stability of the regime.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, it examines the structural nature of Morocco's political system, often described as a model of hybrid governance. In this context, the state prioritizes the preservation of the monarchical system by instituting a system of institutional formalism where elections function primarily to regulate political competition and ensure institutional continuity, rather than to generate systemic ruptures.

Second, the report analyzes the post-2021 systemic reconfiguration. The rise of the National Rally of Independents (RNI), led by businessman and Head of Government Aziz Akhannouch, marks a shift toward a technocratic, business-aligned management of public affairs. The consolidation of the RNI as a 'quasi-ruling party' illustrates a deepening alignment between administrative power and economic elites, reinforcing the status quo under the guise of electoral legitimacy.

Finally, the paper addresses the question of resilience and resistance. In a landscape marked by the depoliticization of civil society and the strategic containment of the media, *can the current trajectory genuinely be characterized as a process of democratization? What are the key manifestations of resistance and adaptation to this process? How does the public sphere respond?* By unpacking these dynamics, this report posits that Morocco's political trajectory is, in fact, a calculated adaptation to internal and external pressures—a modernization of centralized governance that requires a fundamental rethink of both domestic reform strategies and international engagement.

In fact, democratic conditionality as imposed by international donors has not contributed to the institutionalization and consolidation of democratic practices in Morocco. Internal dynamics have further obstructed the transposition of the democratic model in a country marked by specific characteristics that hinder democratization (Sadiki 2004). While the monarchy remains a central, if not the most prominent, political actor in Morocco, it plays a stabilizing role within a depoliticized sphere, particularly through its interventions during moments of crisis. Furthermore, the democratic model must be adapted to domestic realities, taking into account internal specificities such as religion and the depoliticization of the political sphere.

Morocco's process of political change may be described as a model of controlled '*democratisation*'. Several measures were initiated by the Kingdom following the accession of King Hassan II to the throne on February 26, 1961. He introduced Morocco's first Constitution in 1962. Although this Constitution was often described as granted, it also played a key role in reshaping the political landscape of a newly independent and crisis-stricken country. The subsequent years, marked by social, economic, and political unrest, witnessed four successive constitutional reforms under Hassan II's reign, in 1970, 1972, 1992, and 1996.

King Hassan II's reign was characterized by *monarchical supremacy*, placing the monarchy at the pinnacle of the country's political and constitutional hierarchy. These years left a significant mark on Morocco's contemporary history and played a major role in shaping its political landscape, as well as in establishing a political system that faced widespread accusations of violating fundamental rights and freedoms *and exercising authoritarian rule*. Indeed, the international transformations that occurred in the aftermath of the Berlin Wall's collapse posed significant challenges for Morocco as one of the pro-Western hybrid regimes in the MENA region. In particular, the regime embarked on a *democratization process* supported by what is known as *democratic conditionality*.

Democratic conditionality: A failed tool?

Morocco offers a compelling case study illustrating the ineffectiveness of democratic conditionality. The imposition of rapid democratisation and the demand for unconditional compliance, primarily to align with international pressures for political change, have, for the most part, led Morocco, along with several other states, to establish *hybrid regimes*. These regimes often exhibit the outward features of democracy, yet they fall short of implementing genuine internal structural reforms, resulting in a model of procedural democracy [1] (Levitsky & Way, 2006).

What further reinforces this configuration is both the nature and underlying purpose of democratic conditionality, as well as the interplay of three critical factors: *political ties*, *external influence*, and *organizational power dynamics*. Morocco's close relationship with the West—particularly the European Union—has positioned it to benefit from a form of preferential treatment. As a result, democratic conditionality has been reduced to a minimalist approach, where the mere holding of regular elections becomes the main criterion for validating democratic practices, while deeper structural reforms remain largely unaddressed.

[1] On Hybrid Regimes and Competitive Authoritarianism: "Yet if competitive authoritarian regimes fall short of democracy, they also fall short of full-scale authoritarianism. Although incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes may routinely manipulate formal democratic rules, they are unable to eliminate them or reduce them to a mere façade. Rather than openly violating democratic rules (for example, by banning or repressing the opposition and the media), incumbents are more likely to use bribery, co-optation, and more subtle forms of persecution, such as the use of tax authorities, compliant judiciaries, and other state agencies to 'legally' harass, persecute, or extort cooperative behavior from critics." See: Levitsky, S., & Way, A.L. (2006). "Linkage versus Leverage. Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change." *Comparative Politics*, 38(4), 379-400.

The outbreak of the Arab revolutions in 2011 further reinforced the shortcomings of democratic conditionality and highlighted its ineffectiveness. The West appeared primarily concerned with preserving stability in the Arab region, driven by fears of political and social unrest spilling over into their own territories. In response, a series of normative, institutional, and sectoral reforms were implemented, reforms that, while giving the appearance of addressing popular demands, were largely designed to contain unrest and maintain order, rather than to establish or consolidate democratic governance genuinely. Years later, the COVID-19 health crisis was instrumentalized to reinforce state authority, leading to a contraction of public freedoms and a prioritization of security over civil liberties. This resurgence of securitized governance practices that had long been concealed beneath the surface of institutional formalism (Kadaoui, 2022) occurred within a global context of declining multilateralism and the erosion of international legal norms. As Western powers themselves increasingly subordinated democratic principles to security imperatives, the leverage of '*democratic conditionality*' effectively collapsed, exposing the obsolescence of external normative pressure as a driver for domestic reform.

Within a turbulent regional context, Morocco has pursued a distinctive path aimed at safeguarding political stability through a controlled evolutionary process. This strategy prioritizes the maintenance of institutional equilibrium, establishing a model of procedural democracy where elections function primarily as mechanisms for political regulation rather than open contestation. Consequently, this configuration reinforces a logic of institutional continuity, wherein the political field remains structured around the centrality of the Makhzen, [2] acting as the pivotal guarantor of the state's strategic direction and long-term stability. The Makhzen refers to a bureaucracy with institutional power to act. Morocco has, since independence in 1956, revived the Makhzen. In so doing, it integrated the precolonial symbolic and religious, and bureaucratic functions of the Makhzen (which historically served as a treasury for the Sultan who collected taxes) into the modern state system. As a result, in Moroccan statecraft, the Makhzen is the establishment centralizing power around a patrimonial King who wields almost absolute power. The king is aided by a civilian bureaucracy, the military, and state institutions. The Makhzen is sometimes used reductively to refer to the King's authority and the state apparatus that help him wield power and retain it.

New constitutional imprints, preserved political configuration

The succession of constitutional reforms may suggest a gradual democratisation, or one unfolding progressively within the logic of a '*slow but often uninterrupted democratic path*', especially given that the various constitutions aimed to embed Morocco in an affirmed democratic trajectory. However, a more in-depth analysis of the different constitutional prerogatives underscores the structural limitations of Morocco's governance system.

One should note that the 2011 Constitution is laden with democratic references and commitments to the system of fundamental rights (Kadaoui, 2020). However, it should not be assessed solely on the affirmed omnipresence of democratic language in a constitution that was introduced to address popular demands in a turbulent and volatile context. Rather, it is essential to consider the interactions between the different branches of power, the balance of power established by the constitution, and, more specifically, the constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights, which are crucial for democratic functioning.

[2] Definition of the Makhzen: "The Makhzen denotes the informal, elite-driven power structure centered around the monarchy, which exercises decisive influence over state institutions and political outcomes in Morocco." (Hibou, 2004; Waterbury, 1970).

REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE GOVERNMENT

The representativeness of the government is only partially achieved under the new constitutional text, especially when considering the various subcomponents of this first dimension of democracy.

The organization of elections is an integral part of the political tradition in Morocco and is inseparable from the country's political practice. A multiparty system has been in place since the first constitution of 1962 and has been maintained in all subsequent constitutions.[3]

However, its existence does not necessarily translate into democratic practice due to several other factors specific to the Moroccan context. The presence of a partisan landscape does not guarantee its effectiveness either, as political parties, under the various constitutional texts, have not been fully granted total freedom.

The parliament, under the new constitution, has indeed been granted broader powers, but the question of its effectiveness remains (Kadaoui, 2023). The parliament, which holds significant importance in democratic doctrine, operates under the strategic guidance of the Monarchy, despite the expansion of its powers. The relationship between the different branches of power remains complex, and the parliament has not been granted the autonomy necessary for it to be fully effective. The parliamentary deficiencies often ascribed to Morocco's legislature reflect structural fragmentation and weaknesses within the country's political system. Parliamentary oversight, which is key to good governance and accountability, is hampered by the nature of the Morocco's 'constitutional monarchy'. King Mohammed VI enjoys quasi-unfettered authority. He presides over the government. He appoints the Prime Minister and has authority to dissolve the elected parliament. He controls foreign and religious affairs, the military, and the judiciary. While the new constitutional provisions do allow for the *maturation of legislative practice* (Bendourou, 2001), several constitutional gaps hinder the parliament's effectiveness. Nevertheless, this inefficiency is compensated by the strengthening of the executive at the expense of the legislative power, allowing the PM, in some instances and subject to the King's approval, to dissolve the House of Representatives.[4] In Morocco, the real role of the Parliament is mostly to follow the political directions of the executive (Bendouro, 2012). Morocco's parliament is a pluralist legislature. The Socialist Union (USFP) and the Popular Movement (MP), for example, are among the proactive opposition groups in filing written questions in parliamentary sessions. In this sense, they are noted for doing more in terms of upholding principles of parliamentary oversight. That is more than the majority parties, specifically the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM)—'loyal' political parties. The big concern is the issue of weak parliamentary oversight. This is mostly due to the government's slow response to MPs' questions and the gradual decline in government engaging deputies' queries especially on social issues (e.g. education, health, employment). This is one reason why for many Moroccans the legislature is a toothless tiger, despite being an elected institution.

The absence of a political elite and of political parties capable of fulfilling their constitutional role—structuring the public sphere, representing citizens, and governing public affairs with competence and responsibility—constitutes a further structural challenge. Since the 1990s, political formations in Morocco, particularly political parties, have faced an internal institutional impasse linked to their limited capacity to generate a competent political elite. Responsibility for the disengagement that characterizes the contemporary political field is shared by both the state and political parties. This disengagement largely reflects a state-led strategy of political monopolization and reconfiguration, which has fragmented party life through mechanisms of division, marginalization, and the co-optation of opposition forces (Cavatorta, 2007).

[3] Origins of the Multiparty System: The multiparty system has allowed the formation of multiple political parties while preventing the establishment of a single party. Historically, this strategy was employed to avoid the recurrence of political confrontations between the monarchy and hegemonic political formations, similar to the power struggle between the Monarchy and the Istiqlal Party in the immediate post-independence era.

[4] Constitutional Prerogatives (Dissolution): Article 104 of the 2011 Constitution stipulates: "The Head of Government may, by decree issued in the Council of Ministers, dissolve the House of Representatives, following consultations with the King, the President of the House of Representatives, and the President of the Constitutional Court. The Head of Government shall submit to the House of Representatives a formal declaration detailing, in particular, the grounds and objectives underlying such a decision."

Today, the Moroccan partisan sphere includes *38 political parties*, most of which can be described as structures *lacking societal anchoring*. These formations are largely incapable of producing a genuine governing elite, whether ministers, parliamentarians, or competent cadres capable of effectively fulfilling their roles in representing the people. They are also plagued by deep internal dysfunctions, notably undemocratic management practices based on clientelism and favouritism. In this system, competence is often sidelined in favour of personal loyalty to party leaders (Sedraji, s.d.).

This complex configuration, marked by increasing depoliticization and widespread disengagement, is partially offset by the prerogatives of the Monarchy, whether derived from the Constitution or political practice. Aware of this concerning situation, widely debated for several years, the Monarchy frequently intervenes as the supreme arbiter, per *Article 42 of the 2011 Constitution*, which entrusts it with the mission of ensuring the proper functioning of constitutional institutions and, more broadly, that of the State.

Analysing the Moroccan case through the lens of Western democratic theory inevitably leads to the conclusion that the balance and separation of powers are only partially institutionalized, thereby constraining the country's democratisation trajectory. However, a contextualized analysis that accounts for Morocco's specific political configuration, marked by a significantly depoliticized partisan landscape and a corresponding social disengagement, provides a more comprehensive understanding of the monarchy's strategic role. Within this framework, the monarchy functions as a pivotal actor in the governance of domestic affairs and the resolution of systemic crises, thereby contributing to the preservation of political stability in an otherwise fragile institutional setting.

INTEGRITY OF MEDIA

Subtle strategies have been employed to weaken the media landscape through the imposition of various restrictions and limitations on freedom of expression and opinion, measures that, in some cases, have extended to measures that have involved strict judicial interpretations and restrictive application of the legal code regarding journalists. While the 2011 Constitution *enshrines freedom of opinion and expression* as constitutional rights, the actual integrity of the media has seen little substantive improvement, and its overall performance remains notably weak. Despite their constitutional recognition, freedoms of expression, opinion, and the press continue to be constrained by legal frameworks. The Press Code imposes additional restrictions, which, if violated, may result in legal penalties or imprisonment. This creates a structural incompatibility between the constitutional and legal frameworks, reflected in the existence of implicit '*red lines*' that journalists are reluctant to cross for fear of legal or administrative repercussions.

Furthermore, the Moroccan press, which once played a vital role as a counter-power through newspapers and periodicals committed to either overt political opposition or constructive political engagement, is no longer able to fulfill this function. This decline can be attributed to three interrelated yet distinct factors. First, the growing depoliticization of the public sphere has led to a disengaged audience that manifests limited interest in political matters. As a result, the press has increasingly shifted its focus toward content with low intellectual value and minimal political significance, topics that are more likely to attract readership but lack substantive impact. Second, the majority of media outlets have been acquired by political figures—among others, the Chief of Government Aziz Akhannouch [5]—who use them to promote their agendas and viewpoints, thereby compromising the independence of the press and its ability to function as a genuine check on power. Lastly, the financial support provided by the government to the press and publishing sectors, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, has further entrenched the depoliticization of journalism, raising concerns about editorial autonomy and the integrity of the media landscape.[6]

The contemporary media landscape in Morocco aligns closely with Noam Chomsky's theory of the "manufacturing of consent" (Chomsky, 2002)

[5] Media Ownership and Politics: For a detailed mapping of media ownership and political affiliations in Morocco, see the Media Ownership Monitor: <https://maroc.mom-gmr.org/fr/resultats/affiliations-politiques/>

[6] State Support for Press: See: "Le soutien exceptionnel au secteur de la presse et de l'édition," Ministère de la Jeunesse, de la Culture et de la Communication. Available at: <https://mjcc.gov.ma/fr/le-soutien-exceptionnel-au-secteur-de-la-presse-et-de-ledition-prendra-fin-mars-prochain-apres-la-mise-en-oeuvre-du-nouveau-decret/>

Democratic resilience in a controlled setting?

A resilient sphere is considered as such “*if it continues to carry out its mission in the face of adversity.*” (Firesmith, 2019). This also means that the sphere displays resistance to political actors’ attempts to erode democratic governance.

Also, resilience is multifaceted and composed of many components, and requires the existence of a public sphere capable of sustaining capacities to respond and recover from crises (Shein & Emmons, 2023). In Morocco, the public sphere is subjected to various control mechanisms primarily aimed at preserving the stability of the regime in place, rather than encouraging activism towards sustaining democratic governance.

It is certainly true that the capacity for participation of civil society actors has seen minor improvement after the ascension of Mohamed VI and the renewal of monarchic authority, which turned its attention towards social matters. Civil society enjoys, therefore, a certain degree of freedom, without allowing it to be a constraining actor. In fact, much like the partisan sphere, it has been depoliticized, which has led to a reorientation of political participation (both electoral and civil) towards new non-institutional fields (resistance movements, digital spaces, etc.). Nevertheless, the restrictions have not been eased, even under the new constitutional framework. These dynamics highlight the persistent limitations faced by civil society in Morocco, where the state's control mechanisms still play a dominant role in shaping its actions. Despite the growing presence and importance of civil society in the political landscape, its ability to challenge the political system remains constrained by the broader political environment that seeks to manage and co-opt such movements to ensure stability and avoid disruptive changes.

Moreover, the depoliticization [7] of civil society has led to a decline in political participation (Guerraoui & Nouredine Affaya, 2013), particularly in terms of electoral participation, which has been steadily decreasing for decades. [8] This phenomenon fuels the urgent need for a renewal of democracy. The public disillusionment, alongside the lack of trust in traditional institutions, has to some extent corrupted political participation, which is increasingly shifting toward new arenas, notably digital platforms, or resistance movements.

New party; preserved status quo

The election of the National Rally of Independents (RNI) in 2021 did not come as a surprise in Morocco. The moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), which enjoyed electoral success during the 2011 uprisings and worked with the King for nearly ten years is for now sidelined from the power game. Indeed, the PJD, was used by the Monarchical institution (or *Makhzen*) to promote a new model of governance, while also depoliticizing the popular demands of the February 20 social movement that gained mass following in the context of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Despite an anti-corruption and economic reform agenda, the PJD’s decline in popularity among the public was partly caused by its approval of Morocco–Israel normalization in return for security and financial deals. In December 2020, then-PJD Prime Minister Saad Eddine El-Othmani signed the US-brokered Abraham Accords, establishing the only normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel in the Maghreb region. This policy proved to be unpopular with Moroccan voters. It severely undermined the party’s credibility.

[7] Management of the February 20 Movement: The regime's response to the February 20th movement was primarily aimed at restoring stability (Tourabi & Zaki, 2011). As the movement garnered significant international media attention, which legitimized its demands, the state's objective was not to suppress it outright, but rather to neutralize and depoliticize it. This was achieved by implementing measures—specifically the 2011 Constitutional reform—that preserved the regime's democratic legitimacy on the international stage while peacefully defusing the protest wave.

[8] Electoral Abstention: See: Benjamin Bosquet, « Abstention, bipolarisation, Makhzen : Les élections législatives vues de l’Etranger », *Telquel*, October 10, 2016. Available at: https://telquel.ma/2016/10/10/abstention-bipolarisation-makhzen-les-elections-legislatives-vues-letranger_1518436/

The election of the RNI—a centrist party commonly referred to as the state’s party—then emerged in response to a specific context: a context of economic transition, developmental aspirations, and regional positioning. The RNI managed to form a government coalition that was, at the very least, controversial, bringing together the PAM (Authenticity and Modernity Party) and the Istiqlal Party, both government-aligned parties, despite their visibly different orientations.

Its leader, Aziz Akhannouch, appears to combine power and wealth, thereby legitimising his position both as Head of Government and businessman. This alliance raises numerous questions regarding conflicts of interest, as well as the very modalities of political legitimacy in Morocco. It is also worth noting that the position of Head of Government in Morocco is a creation of the political regime, specifically of Driss Basri, the former Minister of the Interior under Hassan II. Akhannouch’s rise to power had long been anticipated and, of course, prepared in advance.

Akhannouch also seems to have mastered the tools of political marketing. During his election campaign, he used a slogan that, in practice, means very little: “*Testahlo hssen / You deserve better.*” This slogan, while popular, remains vague and may function more as political messaging than a substantive policy platform.

From a governance perspective, Akhannouch seems not only to maintain the status quo but to reinforce it. His wealth enables him to acquire key levers of power, consolidate control over the media sector, silence opposing voices, and even co-opt academics. This creates a troubling dynamic, implicitly placing the Head of Government at the top of the political hierarchy, extending even into a form of personalization of executive authority.

His rise was aided by a depoliticized landscape, but it has also reinforced depoliticization and political disengagement through political communication that confirms the preservation of the status quo that defines the very essence of Morocco’s political ‘game’. Akhannouch represents one manifestation of a regime that operates through continuity, privileging political stability at the expense of an externally forced democratization that considers neither the political nor the cultural realities of a centuries-old kingdom with a vast legacy of political control and crisis management.

Democratic backsliding as adaptive governance

In comparative terms, this configuration positions Morocco as a case of stable managed pluralism, where political pluralism is maintained and institutionalized, yet closely regulated to preserve stability and regime coherence rather than to facilitate effective political alternation.

Morocco’s current political trajectory is best understood not as the result of an absence of political will, but as the outcome of a growing misalignment between evolving institutional norms and societal dynamics. While constitutional reforms and procedural mechanisms have advanced over the past decade, levels of political trust, partisan mediation, and citizen engagement have evolved more slowly. This divergence has contributed to a structural tension within the democratic process.

This structural misalignment is not merely an academic observation but has been explicitly acknowledged at the highest level of the state. In his speech on July 29 2017,[9] King Mohammed VI addressed the "unavoidable paradox" between Morocco's international credibility and its internal social deficits. By questioning the utility of institutions when a "visible gap" separates them from the people, the Monarch effectively validated the existence of a severe representation crisis.[10]

This discourse highlights a critical shift in the conception of legitimacy: from procedural legitimacy, based on elections, to performative legitimacy (output legitimacy), based on the capacity to deliver development and manage crises. Consequently, the failure of intermediate institutions to provide credible responses has led to a displacement of recourse toward the summit of the State. As citizens increasingly bypass elected officials to seek direct royal intervention, the Monarchy is reinforced as the ultimate arbiter and guarantor of efficiency. This dynamic paradoxically strengthens the model of '*adaptive governance*': the dysfunctions of the partisan sphere serve to re-legitimize monarchical centrality, positioning the Palace as the sole effective respondent to social grievances.

Within this framework, democratic backsliding in Morocco should be interpreted as a pragmatic adjustment to structural constraints rather than a reversal of the democratic transition. For several decades, Morocco has operated under strong external normative pressure to align with a liberal democratic model that does not fully correspond to its historical, institutional, and societal specificities. In parallel, the depoliticization of the partisan sphere and declining electoral participation have weakened traditional channels of political representation.

In response, the regulation of the political space has functioned as an attempt to restore institutional legitimacy and maintain political stability. This has resulted in a form of stable managed pluralism, where democratic procedures are preserved, but political competition remains closely regulated.

Recommendations

1. RECOMMENDATIONS ADDRESSING DOMESTIC POLITICAL DYNAMICS

- Public authorities should prioritize restoring political legitimacy by addressing the structural crisis of political participation that underpins the current crisis of representation. This requires moving beyond technical or procedural reforms toward measures that rebuild trust between citizens and representative institutions.
- The political space should be reopened to autonomous participation by easing legal, administrative, and coercive constraints on political parties, and civil society organizations to counter long-term depoliticization.
- Electoral governance reforms should aim not only at procedural regularity, but also at enhancing the credibility of political competition, particularly in a context where partisan mediation has been significantly weakened.

[9] The Royal Diagnosis (2017): Full text of the Royal Speech on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the Throne Day (July 29, 2017), where the Sovereign addresses the paradox between Morocco's external progress and internal social deficits. Available at: <https://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-messages-royaux/discours-royaux/texte-integral-du-discours-royal-loccasion-du-18-eme-anniversaire-de-laccession-du-souverain-au>

[10] The Crisis of Intermediation: Empirical findings support the assessment of a structural crisis of trust. A study conducted by the *Institut Royal des Études Stratégiques* (IRES) in 2010 pointed to a sustained crisis of confidence in representative institutions, particularly political parties and Parliament. In this context, the central challenge is no longer limited to dissatisfaction with specific political actors, but extends to broader questions regarding the credibility of representative democracy itself.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS DIRECTED TOWARD EXTERNAL ACTORS AND EUROPEAN PARTNERS

- External actors, particularly the European Union, should adopt an approach grounded in adaptation rather than normative prioritization. Democratic engagement should avoid privileging specific principles or institutional models as universally applicable, and instead recognize the historical, political, and societal specificities that shape Morocco's governance trajectory.
- Democratic conditionality should be applied with restraint, acknowledging its limited capacity to generate substantive political change when societal trust in representative institutions remains low. External support is most effective when it facilitates incremental, context-sensitive adjustments rather than the mechanical implementation of standardized democratic templates.

Conclusion

Years after the adoption of the 2011 Constitution, Morocco's political configuration has remained broadly stable. While constitutional and procedural reforms have been introduced, core political practices and governance dynamics have shown strong continuity. The COVID-19 health crisis further reinforced this trajectory, contributing to a contraction of the public sphere and accelerating trends of political disengagement and depoliticization.

Within this context, the promise of democratic renewal associated with the 2011 constitutional reform has not translated into a substantive transformation of political participation or representation. This outcome, however, should not be understood solely as a failure of reform or a lack of political will. Rather, it reflects a structural misalignment between evolving institutional norms and a society marked by declining trust in representative institutions and weakened partisan mediation.

Faced with this mismatch, the political system has increasingly prioritized stability and governability through procedural regulation of political competition. This has resulted in a configuration best described as *stable managed pluralism*, in which democratic forms are preserved while political participation remains closely regulated. Democratic backsliding, in this sense, emerges less as a retreat from democracy than as an adaptive response to long-standing historical specificities, societal disengagement, and the limits of externally promoted democratic models.

[9] The Royal Diagnosis (2017): Full text of the Royal Speech on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the Throne Day (July 29, 2017), where the Sovereign addresses the paradox between Morocco's external progress and internal social deficits. Available at: <https://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-messages-royaux/discours-royaux/texte-integral-du-discours-royal-loccasion-du-18-eme-anniversaire-de-laccession-du-souverain-au>

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CONTACT US

Toda Peace Institute

Samon Eleven Bldg. 5 th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Email

contact@toda.org

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