

Morocco: The Impact of the War in Ukraine on International and Domestic Affairs. Between Autonomy and Crisis

Beatriz Tomé-Alonso

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

In December 2022, Morocco pulled off a surprise at the World Cup in Qatar and reached the semi-finals. A few days later, the popular excitement about the national team and its media presence was capitalized on politically: Mohammed VI decorated the players and received them and their mothers in Rabat. Beyond the sporting victory, the combination of modernity – with the national team’s meticulously organized reception – and traditional values – represented by the figure of the mother and the centrality of the family and the nation – was highlighted. The connection with the Moroccan diaspora – to which a good number of players belong – was also underlined, and the multiple Moroccan identities – Amazigh, African, Arab and Muslim – were emphasized. A few months later, Mohammed VI insisted on this fact by declaring the Amazigh New Year an official bank holiday. The good sporting results thus made it possible to present a positive image of Morocco in a period marked by the echoes of the war in Ukraine and the difficulties in definitively materializing the new social contract that Mohammed VI announced in 2019 and further specified in 2020.

The Impact of the War in Ukraine, Geopolitical Consequences and Possible Confirmation of Change in the Maghreb Sub-Region

The consequences of the war in Ukraine are manifest on several fronts. Firstly, it has had a negative impact

on the rise in fuel prices, thereby increasing the cost of agricultural production and, consequently, the final price of basic foodstuffs.¹ In fact, according to the World Bank, the war in Ukraine and the reordering of global supply chains largely explain the high rate of inflation in Morocco, which by the end of 2022 had reached 8.3%.^{1,2}

Secondly, and on a more positive note, the conflict in Europe and its impact on the phosphate market has led buyers from all over the world – such as Brazil – to look to Morocco for this material involved in fertilizer production.³ Thus, the OCP (Office Chérifien des Phosphates), the state phosphate company, has substantially increased its revenues in recent months.³ Moreover, this positioning allows Rabat to further expand its network of international alliances beyond its traditional allies and to promote its position in the framework of South-South relations.

Finally, at the geopolitical level, Moroccan diplomacy has shown its willingness to maintain a sovereign, independent policy. Despite being an ally of the United States, the Moroccan representative was absent during the vote on the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the war in Ukraine on 2 March 2022. This desire for autonomy can also be seen in the “neither good nor friendly”⁴ relations with its traditional ally, France, in recent times. Various aspects can explain this situation. In the background is Rabat’s desire for Paris to take a clearer position on Western Sahara, to the point of accepting the territory’s “*Moroccanness*.”⁵ In addition to the visa limitations imposed by France on Morocco, the list of grievances includes the Pegasus case (French media report that Macron’s phone has been targeted

¹ www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-morocco-economy-neutrality.

² www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/02/14/morocco-s-economy-has-come-under-pressure-from-supply-shocks.

³ www.middleeasteye.net/news/morocco-gold-rush-fertilisers-war-ukraine.

⁴ www.jeuneafrique.com/1423034/politique/la-reponse-du-maroc-a-macron-nos-relations-ne-sont-ni-bonnes-ni-amicales/.

⁵ <https://en.hespress.com/57041-akhannouch-france-should-no-longer-be-an-observer-in-sahara-issue.html>.

by the Moroccan intelligence service, which Rabat denies).⁶ So does the resolution on the situation of journalists in Morocco, issued by the European Parliament last January, in which the Maghreb country was urged to respect freedom of expression and press freedom.⁷ Rabat accuses France of being behind this resolution and of “orchestrating an anti-Moroccan campaign in Brussels.”⁸

Another area of competition between Rabat and Algiers has been reactivated. Algeria is seeking to revalue its role as a gas producer while Morocco continues its commitment to renewable energies

Although it would not be accurate to speak of a change in the regional order, recent months have confirmed certain trends in the Maghreb sub-region that affect Rabat. Beyond the capitals that have maintained a constant presence, there is a growing relevance of other actors, such as Russia (and also China), with whom Morocco cultivates a positive relationship. The arrival of what could be called “third actors” is taking place in a context of the EU and US’s loss of normative power and the crisis of the international liberal order (Acharya, 2014).

This is also the case of Israel, with which Rabat has recently signed agreements in the areas of trade, tourism and security. However, this presence is somewhat more awkward and difficult for Morocco to reconcile. While the authorities exploit Moroccan-Jewish identity, family and historical ties and shared culture to encourage the general population connect with the State of Israel,⁹ the latter remains eminently pro-Palestinian. If we return to the symbolism of the national football team at the World Cup in Qatar, the Palestinian flag appeared on the playing field while

celebrating a victory. In this regard, according to the Arab Barometer, only a third of Moroccans are in favour of the normalization of relations between their country and Israel.¹⁰ This low popular support and the fact that Rabat wants to maintain – at least in dialectical terms – its defence of Palestinian rights may explain the postponement of the Negev Forum, where Israel, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and the United States are participating, following Tel Aviv’s announcement to build more than 4,500 settlements in the West Bank.¹¹

In parallel, the war in Ukraine has brought energy-related issues back to the forefront. And hence another area of competition between Rabat and Algiers has been reactivated. While both capitals seek to position themselves as reliable energy suppliers to Europe, Algeria is seeking to revalue its role as a gas producer while Morocco continues its commitment to renewable energies. The latter’s efforts to become a green hub, especially through the development of the Noor solar plants in Ouarzazate, would allow it to increase its soft power and become an ally of the EU in the area of environmental policy as well (Casani and Tomé-Alonso, 2023). Competition also extends to their role as transit countries. Both capitals are developing alternative and competing projects to transport Niger’s gas to Europe: in contrast to the trans-Saharan pipeline project, which would cross Niger to Algeria, Rabat is promoting the creation of another pipeline that would connect Morocco to Europe after crossing more than 10 West African countries, including Mauritania and Senegal (Hernando de Larramendi and Thieux, 2022).

Difficulties in Consolidating the New Social Pact: Economic Crisis, Inequality and Drought

The multiple and overlapping crises that have occurred since 2019, the year in which Mohamed VI announced the need to build a new social pact, have made it difficult to implement the pact, while at the same time un-

⁶ www.reuters.com/technology/french-prosecutor-opens-probe-after-pegasus-spyware-complaint-2021-07-20/.

⁷ www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0057_EN.html.

⁸ <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/resolution-du-parlement-europeen-pas-de-crise-avec-le-maroc-assure-paris-1730053>.

⁹ <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/maroc-la-culture-judeo-marocaine-au-service-de-la-normalisation-avec-israel,6114>.

¹⁰ www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Morocco_Report-ENG.pdf.

¹¹ www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/06/22/la-question-des-colonies-en-cisjordanie-brouille-la-normalisation-des-relations-entre-le-maroc-et-israel_6178744_3212.html.

derlining its necessity. The new development model, which had already been defined in 2020 around three main axes – economic recovery, universal social coverage and public sector reform¹²– has encountered economic and social difficulties. The request for two credit lines from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2020 and March 2023 and the fact that Morocco has also turned to the private capital market (Casani and Tomé-Alonso, 2023) point in this direction.

An awareness of inequality, the worsening economic situation and food insecurity can be perceived

Recently published data seem to confirm this state of affairs. The latest UNDP Human Development Report ranks Morocco 123rd (out of 176), compared to its neighbours Tunisia and Algeria, which are 97th and 91st respectively. For its part, the Moroccan High Commissioner for Planning notes in a recent report that the Moroccan unemployed number 1.5 million people.

This economic and social situation, which is also marked by a high level of inequality,¹³ raises the possibility of protests on the horizon, especially in peripheral regions, where there is a feeling of disadvantage compared to the centre and where the unequal redistribution of resources is more evident (Hernando de Larramendi and Thieux, 2018). The drought of recent months has intensified this situation while the government is trying to move forward with the National Drinking Water Supply and Irrigation Programme (PNAEPI), planned for the years 2020-2027.

The latest data from the Arab Barometer reflects this scenario.¹⁴ Although some questions still have the Covid-generated crisis very much in mind, an awareness of inequality, the worsening economic situation and food insecurity can be perceived. Thus, 66% of Moroccans say that the pandemic has had a more damaging effect on poor citizens, as many of them have seen their incomes fall drastically. In the same vein, only 33% of respondents say the economic situation is good or very good, the lowest percentage

recorded by the Arab Barometer since 2007. Finally, 62% of Moroccans say that they have been worried in the past year about not having an income that would guarantee their access to food.

Conclusions

The last few months have led to an ambivalent assessment of the Moroccan situation. While it is true that Morocco has managed to maintain its neutrality in the face of the Russian-Ukrainian war and advance its position on the South-South cooperation axis, confrontation and clashes with Algeria remain a constant. Moreover, Rabat has not managed to escape the adverse economic effects of the international situation.

In domestic terms, political stability was reinforced following the victory in 2021 of the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and the appointment of Akhannouch, whose friendship with Mohammed VI is widely known, as Prime Minister. However, the country's economic and social situation seems more delicate.

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¹² www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-royal-au-parlement-loccasion-de-louverture-de-la-1-ere-session-de-la-5-eme.

¹³ www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/equidad-fiscal-y-desigualdades-en-el-magreb/.

¹⁴ www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Morocco_Report-ENG.pdf.