

# Morocco and the Management of Pending Challenges

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The Moroccan political and economic landscape in 2024 has been characterized, both domestically and internationally, by continuity in the management of the most pressing issues, which emerged the previous year. This analysis will focus on four in particular: the humanitarian management of the 8 September 2023 earthquake and the reconstruction plans for the affected area; the impact of the drought on the country's agricultural activity; the reform of the *Moudawana*; and Morocco's response and positioning with regard to the war in Gaza.

## **A Punishing Economy for Rural Regions: From Earthquake to Drought**

Shortly before midnight on 8 September 2023, a 6.8-magnitude earthquake shook the Marrakesh-Safi region. The epicentre was in the province of Al Haouz, in the High Atlas Mountains, 71 km away from the tourist city of Marrakesh. A total of 2,946 people were killed and 4,661 injured, 1,139 seriously. The largest number of victims was concentrated in and around the mountains, and the region also sustained significant material losses. In all, 59,674 buildings collapsed, of which 32% were completely destroyed and 68% partially damaged.

Despite the country's extensive experience with earthquakes, both the disaster's management and the causes of the high death toll were the subject of criticism and controversy. As in other recent cases, such as the 2004 Al Hoceima earthquake, the

government's response was conditioned by the hierarchical nature of the country's decision-making structure, specifically, the lack of response by the Alawite monarchy. King Mohammed VI, who was in France when the disaster struck, said nothing until his return to Rabat, when, 19 hours later, the Palace issued a statement announcing its plans to deal with the emergency. Until that point, the rest of the authorities, from the head of government and minister of the interior to governors and mayors, remained silent, without travelling to the affected areas. It was not until four days after the earthquake that the monarch first went to Marrakesh to visit the injured at a hospital.

The government's absence in the crisis's management was offset the first few days by the actions of the army and rescue teams on the ground, as well as by the efforts of Moroccan civil society, which launched campaigns across the country to aid and raise funds for the affected areas. Another highly controversial action in the earthquake's immediate wake was the country's acceptance of aid from only four countries (Spain, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) and its concomitant rejection of that offered by France and Algeria, with whom relations are strained. This fact underscored, once again, the importance and impact of foreign policy on the country's domestic policy.

Separately, the sheer scope of the loss of life, injuries, and damage caused by the quake exposed the persistence of points of vulnerability and significant pockets of poverty in rural Morocco, much of which has yet to undergo the economic transformations that have taken place in other areas of the country. In analysing the death toll, disaster researchers argued that earthquake mortality is related to broader social and political issues, such as poverty, lack of education, or development. "Earthquakes don't kill

people, collapsing infrastructure does,”<sup>1</sup> they claimed, meaning that both prevention and early warning systems, as well as an updated building code in high-seismic-risk areas, are paramount to reduce the risk of disaster. This stands in contrast to the use of masonry and dry materials in the construction of most buildings in the affected areas. In short, the September 2023 earthquake shone a spotlight on regional inequality in the country and the need for regional planners to adopt comprehensive development plans that effectively include rural regions.

## The September 2023 earthquake shone a spotlight on regional inequality in the country

In keeping with this logic, once the initial chaos had subsided, the Moroccan authorities launched the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Programme for Affected Areas, following guidelines received from the monarch. The plan, which mobilized the equivalent of 11.7 billion euros, allocated 2.038 billion euros to emergency aid for families, financial aid for housing, and reconstruction and improvement of infrastructure over the 2023-2027 period. Specifically, it provided for monthly payouts of 2,500 dirhams (230 euros) to all families affected by the earthquake for a period of one year, as well as of 140,000 dirhams (12,970 euros) to each family whose home had been damaged or destroyed. The remainder, equivalent to 9.078 billion euros, was allocated to modernizing general infrastructure networks and improving living conditions in the High Atlas provinces.<sup>2</sup>

By the first quarter of 2024, 51,300 families had benefited from the first tranche of aid for the reconstruction of totally or partially destroyed homes, 42,047 reconstruction permits had been granted,

and 8,694 homes were in the process of being rebuilt and refurbished.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, non-governmental organizations present on the ground continue to report a lack of sufficient shelter options for the victims, many of whom remain in tents, with inadequate shelter materials to ensure their safety and dignity.<sup>4</sup>

In 2024, the previous year's dynamics have also continued in terms of water stress. For the last six years, the country has been affected by what is now the longest drought in its history, with 70% less rainfall than average. In March, reservoirs were only 26% full, well below the 34% registered for the same period in 2023, let alone the 71% registered ten years ago. This situation has a direct impact on one of the country's main economic activities, namely, agriculture, which accounts for not only 90% of Morocco's water consumption but also 15% of the country's GDP and which employs around 45% of the workforce. Consequently, according to the Moroccan Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Rural Development, and Water and Forests, as a result of this water scarcity, cultivated land in the country is expected to fall by nearly half and crop yields to see a 20% decline, with devastating effects for this year's harvest<sup>5</sup> and a direct impact on the country's poorest farmers and stockbreeders.

### A New *Moudawana* Reform

The year 2024 is expected to see the conclusion of the process to reform the *Moudawana*, launched two years ago. The *Moudawana* i.e. the personal code regulating civil law matters affecting family relations, was last reformed in 2004, following a long negotiation process between the country's various political and social forces. This new reform can trace its origins to the request for a review made by Mohammed VI in a speech delivered on 30 July 2022, in which he called for a new *Moudawana* that would take into account “the stipulations of the Islamic Sharia and the particularities of the Moroccan

<sup>1</sup> [www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-02880-3](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-02880-3).

<sup>2</sup> <https://mipa.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-High-Atlas-Earthquake.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> [www.cg.gov.ma/fr/node/11720](https://www.cg.gov.ma/fr/node/11720).

<sup>4</sup> <https://care.ca/2024/04/15/morocco-more-than-six-months-after-the-earthquake-the-road-to-recovery-remains-long/>.

<sup>5</sup> [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240417-morocco-hit-by-drought-affecting-20-of-crop-yield/](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240417-morocco-hit-by-drought-affecting-20-of-crop-yield/).

society, building, to that end, on a moderate, balanced approach, on open-minded interpretation” to ensure “the full participation of Moroccan women in all sectors.”<sup>6</sup>

The ensuing foot-dragging prompted the monarch to intervene a second time in September 2023, when he set a six-month deadline for an advisory committee, made up of representatives of various government, judicial and religious institutions, to give impetus to the reform. Specifically, this committee consisted of representatives of the Ministry of Justice, the High Council of the Judiciary, the Presidency of the Public Ministry (Public Prosecutor’s Office), the High Council of the Ulema, the National Human Rights Council, and the government authority responsible for Solidarity, Social Integration and Family.

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Over those six months, the committee met and heard the proposals prepared by various Moroccan civil society and political actors, among which significant discrepancies have emerged, especially between the country’s most conservative and most progressive forces. The thorniest issues have been those related to the regime for marriage and its dissolution, polygamy, the inheritance distribution system and child marriage. On the one hand, Islamist groups, such as the Justice and Development Party (PJD), have advocated framing the *Moudawana*’s revision within the country’s “religious and constitutional reference points,” speaking out against proposals that “seek to destroy Moroccan families.”<sup>7</sup>

The proposals in question are those advocated by the sectors represented by leftist parties and feminist associations, which call for, among other things, a total ban on marriage of minors and polygamy (under the previous reform, possible cases were restricted and authorization was subject to judicial validation), equal inheritance rights for men and women (currently, women receive half of what men do, within a system of inheritance by agnation), recognition of parental co-responsibility, and equal child custody rights after divorce.

Tension between the two sectors grew as the months allotted to the receipt and debate of proposals passed, to the extent that feminist organizations and activities have reported being pressured, intimidated and threatened because of their positions on the reform.<sup>8</sup> In this context, on 30 March, the committee submitted its final proposal, whose content is still unknown, to the head of government, Aziz Akhannouch, who, in turn, referred it to King Mohammed VI to arbitrate on. Once he has, the bill is expected to be put to a vote in the two houses of Parliament at some point around July.<sup>9</sup> The scope of the reform is still uncertain, although it seems likely that the text will follow the general guidelines laid down by the monarch in July 2022, when he indicated that, as Commander of the Faithful, he would not rule on a reform that did not respect the precepts of Islam or that “I shall not make licit that which the Almighty has forbidden, nor shall I forbid that which He has authorized, particularly when it comes to matters governed by unequivocal Quranic prescriptions.”<sup>10</sup>

### Morocco’s Silences and Actions in Relation to the Conflict in Gaza

The outbreak of the war in Gaza, launched by Israel in response to Hamas’s attacks in October 2023, has left the surrounding Arab countries in an ambiguous position. Despite their public condemnations of the offensive, not only have they refrained from taking concrete measures against the State of

<sup>6</sup> [www.mapnews.ma/en/discours-messages-sm-le-roi/hm-king-delivers-speech-nation-throne-day-full-text](http://www.mapnews.ma/en/discours-messages-sm-le-roi/hm-king-delivers-speech-nation-throne-day-full-text).

<sup>7</sup> [www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/abdellillah-benkirane-attacks-feminist-demands-to-revise-moroccos-family-code/20231114190000193595.html](http://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/abdellillah-benkirane-attacks-feminist-demands-to-revise-moroccos-family-code/20231114190000193595.html).

<sup>8</sup> [https://telquel.ma/instant-t/2024/04/16/menaces-terroristes-contre-des-feministes-marocaines-des-associations-alertent-le-parquet\\_1866408/](https://telquel.ma/instant-t/2024/04/16/menaces-terroristes-contre-des-feministes-marocaines-des-associations-alertent-le-parquet_1866408/).

<sup>9</sup> [www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/04/11/au-maroc-derniere-ligne-droite-pour-le-projet-de-reforme-du-code-de-la-famille\\_6227243\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/04/11/au-maroc-derniere-ligne-droite-pour-le-projet-de-reforme-du-code-de-la-famille_6227243_3212.html).

<sup>10</sup> [www.mapnews.ma/en/discours-messages-sm-le-roi/hm-king-delivers-speech-nation-throne-day-full-text](http://www.mapnews.ma/en/discours-messages-sm-le-roi/hm-king-delivers-speech-nation-throne-day-full-text).

Israel, but they have also worked to contain the popular outcry of their citizens over the conflict. This situation is particularly notable in the case of Morocco, which, in 2020, normalized its relations with Israel through the so-called “Abraham Accords,” establishing Moroccan diplomatic representation in Tel Aviv in exchange for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in the Western Sahara. Since then, the level of cooperation on defence and technology issues has only intensified, as have economic and trade relations between the two countries, which last year reached an all-time high of 116.7 million dollars, up from 56.2 million dollars the year before.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, rallies and demonstrations against the Israeli offensive have been a constant in the Alawite Kingdom since the start of the war, especially in the country’s large cities, where the protests have been dominated by calls for two things: an end to the Israeli massacre in Gaza and an end to relations between the two states.<sup>12</sup>

The Moroccan authorities’ position toward the conflict has been characterized by the adoption of a low and largely silent profile – as witnessed by the lack of any statement at all by the monarch for more than a month and a half and only minimal ones by the government – and actions undertaken based on the special relations between the two countries and leadership attributed to King Mohammed VI, as both Commander of the Faithful and president of the Al-Qods Committee for Palestine. In this context, attention should be drawn to the delivery of 40 tonnes of humanitarian aid, consisting of basic necessities, sent in March by means of an “unprecedented” overland route through Israeli territory, whose opening was facilitated by Morocco’s good relations with Israel. Finally, within the uncertainty over the future of Gaza, Morocco seems to be considering the possi-

bility, once the Israeli offensive is over, of accepting the US proposal to join the “peacekeeping forces,” which would be tasked with ensuring the Strip’s political and economic rehabilitation in a future scenario without Hamas, in exchange for recognition of Palestine and the establishment of two states.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their public condemnations of the offensive, not only have they refrained from taking concrete measures against the State of Israel, but they have also worked to contain the popular outcry of their citizens over the conflict

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<sup>11</sup> [www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/economy-and-business/morocco-israel-trade-booms/20240414140000198603.html](http://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/economy-and-business/morocco-israel-trade-booms/20240414140000198603.html).

<sup>12</sup> <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/maroc-manifestations-populaires-et-silence-royal,7010>.

<sup>13</sup> [www.ft.com/content/063e4b92-753a-4c9a-bbd4-e1ed40d20c62](http://www.ft.com/content/063e4b92-753a-4c9a-bbd4-e1ed40d20c62).