



# Morocco

**Assessment:** Poor

**Trend:** ↑↑

Capital: Rabat

Type of Government: Constitutional Monarchy

Head of Government: Prime Minister

Abderrahmane Youssoufi (since 14 March 1998)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Mohamed Benaissa

Population: 30,645,305

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 123

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Morocco has a **poor** record of support for democracy abroad. Morocco is not itself a democracy, and its policies toward countries in the developing world are driven foremost by security concerns and by a desire for these countries to support its position on the long-standing Western Sahara dispute. Morocco has maintained close relations with authoritarian West African and Middle Eastern governments that attained or maintain power through coups or dubious elections. It has not raised its voice to urge greater democracy in these countries or elsewhere. This has remained constant over the past decade, despite the progress Morocco has made internally in encouraging political pluralism and expanding human rights.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

In July 1999, Mohamed VI replaced his late father Hassan II on the throne with pledges to promote human rights and democracy. In his first national address, the new king declared, “We strongly adhere to the system of constitutional monarchy, political pluralism...establishment of the state of rights and law, safeguarding human rights and individual and collective liberties...”<sup>1</sup> He later declared, with respect to legislative elections that were to take place in September 2002, “Morocco is a democracy. The next elections will be transparent. They will reflect the will of the Moroccan citizenry.”<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssoufi endorsed this claim: “For the first time in Morocco, the government will be able to organize transparent elections. This is without doubt the most important accomplishment of the democratic transition. We will motivate the Moroccan people and instill confidence in them so that the majority that emerges from the voting will be seen as having a popular mandate...”<sup>3</sup>

There has not been, however, any sign of a heightened role for democracy in foreign policy, either at the level of official discourse or policy. Since Mohamed VI’s accession, no unfair election or coup anywhere has occasioned any public expression of disapproval or downgrading of relations, the most recent example being Zimbabwe’s flawed vote in March 2002.

The domestic political context hardly favors democracy promotion abroad. Despite recent reforms and promises of clean elections, Morocco is not yet a democracy. The King accedes to the throne by heredity and wields considerable power within the Moroccan political system. Showing disrespect for the King or the monarchy is punishable under Moroccan law and advocating curbs on the King’s powers is risky, though less dangerous than in the past. In addition, the King appoints the prime minister. In practice, the ministers of interior, defense, justice, foreign affairs and religious affairs are also picked by, and report to, the palace. Thus, the key international relations portfolios are among those in which elected officials have the least input.

Deputies in the lower house of parliament are elected by direct popular vote and belong to a range of political parties. But the chamber’s powers are quite limited and elections to it in the past have been tainted by fraud. The legislature has played no role in orienting foreign policy toward greater promotion of democracy.

Morocco nevertheless enjoys far more political pluralism and freedom of expression and of association than it did a decade ago. Independent newspapers, human rights organizations and other civil society associations expose and criticize rights abuses. They challenge the administration to ensure that domestic elections are free and fair. Some print media and other organizations have taken advantage of the freer atmosphere to question the government's coziness with certain repressive governments. But this pressure from civil society has not led to any reorientation of foreign policy.

Beyond its ties with the United States and the European Union, Morocco's international activity is concentrated in three overlapping arenas: Africa, the Maghreb, and the Middle East.

In the decade after King Hassan ascended to the throne in 1961, Morocco's foreign policies were guided by an evolving series of objectives, none conducive to promoting democracy abroad. First, the King sought to consolidate power at home and stifle a domestic leftist opposition that drew some support from radical regimes in Egypt and in newly independent Algeria. Morocco sought also to mend and nurture relations with France, and served as a Cold War ally of the U.S. in Africa and the Middle East, which in turn provided Morocco with economic and military aid. Morocco maintains close alliances with the United States and France today.

Beginning in the early 1970s, the disputed Western Sahara emerged both as the focal point of Morocco's foreign relations and as a nationalist cause that King Hassan II exploited to consolidate his rule at home. Morocco claimed sovereignty over this phosphate-rich territory more than half as large as Morocco itself, which had been administered by Spain during the colonial period. The United Nations proposed to let the territories' sparse population hold a referendum to choose between independence and Moroccan sovereignty. But when Spain withdrew its forces in 1975, Morocco quickly moved in to occupy much of the disputed territory. The following year, the liberationist Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro (the Polisario) proclaimed the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). War then broke out between the SADR and Morocco.

Since that time, much of Morocco's diplomatic energy has been focused on cultivating support for its claims to the Western Sahara and

isolating the Polisario. This desert territory became the new vortex of Morocco's historically stormy relations with Algeria, which hosted the Polisario's leadership and military bases, and championed its cause in international fora.

The nature of the Western Sahara conflict militates against Morocco's advocacy of democracy elsewhere. While Rabat and the Polisario agreed in 1988 to the UN proposal for a referendum on this issue, their disagreement over voter eligibility has prevented it from being held. Rabat has avoided criticism of other countries' democratic shortcomings as it might invite scrutiny of its own commitment to allowing a free and fair referendum in the Western Sahara, to say nothing of elections in Morocco itself.

### **RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS**

Morocco did not publicly show or voice any disapproval of the overthrow of elected governments in Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, or Nigeria. However, Morocco is a member of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), whose secretary-general "firmly condemned" the coup d'état in Cote d'Ivoire in December 1999. The OIF also adopted a resolution on 26 September 2000, urging a return to constitutionality in the Cote d'Ivoire before and during elections scheduled for the following month. Morocco also joined the Arab League condemnation of the April 1999 coup in the Comoros Islands and refused to recognize the new regime, though it did meet with Mohamed Yamani Souif, the new Foreign Minister of Comoros in Rabat<sup>6</sup>

### **RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

Morocco has generally abstained from commenting on obvious manipulations of elections abroad. For example, the Moroccan government was silent when Egypt staged unfair parliamentary elections in 1995.

Tunisian President Ben Ali has been re-elected three times since seizing power in 1987, each time with more than 99 percent of the popular vote, according to the official count. In May 2002, a similar majority endorsed changes to the constitution to enable Ben Ali to run for a fourth term in 2004 and a fifth in 2009. None of these dubious votes, nor the steady closure of space for



genuine opposition political parties of all tendencies, has prompted the slightest public protest from Rabat. Shortly after the flawed referendum of May 2002, Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssoufi traveled to Tunisia and declared that, following reciprocal visits by President Ben Ali and King Mohamed VI, the two countries enjoyed a relationship of brotherhood, friendship, and openness.

When Niger's General Ibrahim Bara Mainassara won elections in July 1996, six months after he had seized power in a coup, Morocco reportedly was among the African governments that hastily applauded the vote.<sup>7</sup> Election observers, human rights groups, and the United States government had all criticized those elections as neither free nor fair.<sup>8</sup> Morocco is not known to have voiced any criticism of Zimbabwe's March 2002 presidential election, which was denounced as not free or fair by the EU and the United States, and resulted in Zimbabwe's one-year suspension from the fifty-four nation Commonwealth.

The one time Morocco criticized the manipulation of elections by another government was an exception that proves the rule. In 1992, King Hassan II expressed regret in press interviews that military-backed leaders in Algeria had interrupted legislative elections in January of that year in order to prevent a landslide victory by the Islamic Salvation Front. The King told *The Washington Post* that he would have allowed the elections to proceed in order to prove to the electorate that Islamists could not govern effectively. "Religion is not enough to run a country," he said. "You have to have politics, diplomacy, economics, finance, agriculture and social programs," said the king. "Had the Algerian elections been allowed to proceed, we would have seen ... [the fundamentalists] at work: we would have seen how they actually perform."

The king had never before advocated free elections in Algeria or anywhere else. Moreover, Morocco refused to legalize its own leading Islamist party. Hence, King Hassan's comment in 1992 appears to be one more volley in the fractious Moroccan-Algerian relationship, rather than a genuine concern for political pluralism next door.

## PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Morocco maintains a modest program of bilateral aid to some of its African allies and to the Palestinian Authority -- none of it apparently

devoted to democracy promotion. Morocco receives far more in foreign assistance than it gives out. It has long been the largest recipient of French bilateral aid and is a (distant) third among U.S. aid recipients in the Middle East. Morocco is a member of the Maghreb Arab Union, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Few members of these organizations can be considered democracies. Morocco has not sought to use these fora as a platform for promoting democratic principles in any consistent fashion.

Morocco did, however, take the bold step in 1999 of becoming the first Arab state to allow the region's human rights movement to convene a regional meeting on its soil. Prime Minister Youssoufi gave the inaugural address to the gathering of activists from fifteen countries. The participants adopted a declaration urging that "Arab governments legalize, in the framework of democratic constitutions and laws, the rights of assembly and peaceful association for all intellectual and political groups and forces, including the unarmed Islamic groups."<sup>9</sup>

At international conferences, Moroccan officials have touted Morocco's embrace of democracy, multi-partyism and civil society, sometimes suggesting that other countries might also benefit from progress in these realms. Human Rights Minister Mohamed Aujjar sounded this note in his address before a conference on development and human rights in Cairo in June 1999.

Morocco has advocated the rights of the Palestinian people living under Israeli occupation. Each year, it sends a small amount of financial aid and in-kind assistance to the Palestinian Authority, but has never used its voice to advocate democratic rights *per se* under the Palestinian Authority or anywhere in the Middle East and North Africa.

Morocco took part in drafting the Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism which threatens human rights by, among other things, defining offenses related to "terrorism" in a vague fashion and undermining fair-trial guarantees and press freedom.<sup>10</sup> It was adopted in 1998 and ratified by Morocco on 30 August 2001.

Morocco quit the Organization of African Unity in 1984 and remains outside its successor institution, the African Union. It therefore has not joined the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) or the Charter's democracy clause adopted in 1997. However,



Morocco has publicly embraced NEPAD. King Mohamed VI, addressing the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg on 2 September 2002, saluted “the Africa that has brought NEPAD into being” and said that “democracy needs to become more consolidated to better empower individuals and collectivities.”

### **POLICY TOWARD ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS**

Morocco has had a long history of close ties to entrenched dictatorships in the Middle East and Africa. It also consistently supports those nations that take its side in Western Sahara dispute.

The absence of democracy and civil and political rights in Ben Ali’s Tunisia has never disturbed Morocco’s friendly relations with this Maghreb nation and the frequent high-level visits between the two leaders. Morocco has even, on occasion, prevented its own citizens from exercising their right to criticize the deterioration of human rights in Tunisia. On 21 September 1998, authorities deployed police to enforce a ban on a public meeting about Tunisia, organized by the Moroccan Association for Human Rights and the Moroccan Bar Association.<sup>11</sup> Authorities imposed the ban for unspecified security considerations, but most observers believed that it was to avoid offending the government of Tunisia. On 11 May 2000, police in Rabat forcibly dispersed a small demonstration in front of the Tunisian embassy, organized by Moroccan human rights activists in support of the persecuted Tunisian journalist Taoufik Ben Brik – though a similar demonstration was allowed to occur on 26 July 2002.

Relations with Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi have had their ups and downs over the past decade. But at no point is Morocco known to have made the lack of democracy in Libya an issue in bilateral relations or in regional affairs.

African autocrats can count on Morocco’s backing if they side with it in the Western Sahara dispute. Africa’s two longest-ruling autocrats, Gabon’s Hadj Omar Bongo and Togo’s Gnassingbé Eyadéma, have regularly supported Morocco’s cause in the OAU.<sup>12</sup> Gabon has long been Morocco’s staunchest advocate within the

organization. At the OAU summit in 1998, Gabon and summit host Burkina Faso backed the unsuccessful effort to expel the SADR. Gabon has employed Moroccan forces in its domestic security service.<sup>13</sup> Morocco also reportedly provides financial and technical assistance to Gabon in the fields of telecommunications, tourism, and real estate development, and Hassan II helped to fund construction of a mosque in Libreville.<sup>14</sup> Togo has also reportedly used Moroccan forces for domestic security in the past.<sup>15</sup>

Rabat has backed the leader of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, since his 1979 coup. For over two decades, Obiang’s reign over the tiny country has been facilitated by the presence of several hundred Moroccan presidential guards.<sup>16</sup> It is reported that Moroccan troops executed Obiang’s predecessor because Guinean troops were intimidated by the magical powers said to surround him.<sup>17</sup> They remained in place while Obiang won a one-candidate presidential election in 1989. Subsequent presidential and legislative elections, held in 1996 and 1999 respectively, were also flawed.<sup>18</sup> Yet Moroccan troops were still protecting Obiang until at least 2000.

Presidents Obiang of Equatorial Guinea and Bongo of Gabon have visited Morocco frequently. In July 2001 Mohamed VI hosted in turn Obiang, Bongo, and Eyadéma. Obiang visited twice in June and July 2002 and held discussions with Mohamed VI. There is no evidence that the King discussed issues of human rights and democracy with these heads of state.

Morocco’s friendship with another long-serving autocrat and ally on the Western Sahara issue, President Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo (then called Zaire), dates to the Cold War. In 1977 and 1978, Moroccan troops flew in missions approved by the U.S. and France to help Mobutu subdue an insurgency in Katanga Province (then called Shaba). Ties to Mobutu remained close throughout his reign. In February 1997, as rebels advanced on the Zairean capital, Mobutu conferred in Rabat with King Hassan II. After his ouster three months later, Mobutu was given refuge in Morocco, where he died.

<sup>1</sup> BBC Monitoring Service. 2 Aug. 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Le Figaro. 3 Sep. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Florence, Beauge. “Pour la première fois, le Maroc va organiser des élections transparentes.” Le Monde 25 Jan. 2002.



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<sup>6</sup> “Comoran and Moroccan foreign ministers meet in Rabat.” 20 May 1999. *Arab News.com*. 10 October 2002 <<http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/990520/1999052051.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> “Mainassara--'The Victorious One'? He Dug His Own Grave,” *Ghanaian Independent*, 15 April 1999. Morocco failed to respond to a request from the Democracy Coalition Project to clarify its positions on the 1996 elections in Niger.

<sup>8</sup> See “The Statement by the National Democratic Institute on 7 and 8 July 1996 Presidential Election in Niger,” at [http://www.accessdemocracy.org/NDI/library/1101\\_ne\\_preselect.pdf](http://www.accessdemocracy.org/NDI/library/1101_ne_preselect.pdf) [17 June 2002].

<sup>9</sup> “The Casablanca Declaration of the Arab Human Rights Movement,” (Cairo: Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies), pp. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, *The Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism: A Serious Threat to Human Rights*, AI Index IOR 51/001/2002, 9 January 2002.

<sup>11</sup> “Human Rights Watch Condemns Prohibition of Human Rights March and Meeting in Morocco.” *Human Rights Watch: Press Release*. 22 Sep. 1998. 17 June 2002 <<http://www.hrw.org/press98/sept/moroc923.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> *US Department of State: The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2001* states with respect to Gabon, “Although opposition parties have been legal since 1990, a single party, the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), has remained in power since 1968 and has circumscribed political choice...” The same report states with respect to Togo, “Although opposition political parties were legalized following widespread protests in 1991, Eyadema and his Rally of the Togolese People (RPT), strongly backed by the armed forces, have continued to dominate political power.”

<sup>13</sup> Barnes, James F. *Gabon: Beyond the Colonial Legacy*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Zartman, I. William. “Moroccan Foreign Policy,” in Brown, Carl L., ed. *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2001, p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> Haygood, Will. “Equatorial Guinea accused of rights abuses; African nation called ‘a nasty little dictatorship in the middle of nowhere.’” *Boston Globe*. 25 July 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Sundiata, Ubrahim K. *Equatorial Guinea: Colonialism, State Terror and the Search for Stability*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1990, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> United States. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001*. Washington: U.S. Department of State, 2002.