

# **Contribution of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative to Morocco's Regionalisation Plan**

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## **Historical background**

Unlike the other countries of the region, from the dawn of its independence Morocco showed undeniable political and strategic interest in decentralization and was always very open in the area of management of local affairs. Its ultimate goal is to lay the foundations for the development of its regions, by banking on the creation and the strengthening of local management and governance capacities on the basis of the resources (especially human) of the region.

Morocco's decentralization policy attests to the awareness and political will of public authorities to devolve power and set the stage for decentralization followed by regionalization, taking into account the multi-faceted social structure of the Kingdom and its regions. It also bears testimony to Morocco's deep belief that learning the rules of democracy, political socialization and political participation are first and foremost a local matter. The country's policy fosters the dissemination of the culture of governance at the local level and bases the relationship between citizens/regions/central government on an economic, social and cultural neighbouring policy.

Morocco is indeed the only country in the African region and in the Middle East to have adopted such a regionalization policy based on an evolutionary process aimed at recognizing the regions' personality and at allowing them to contribute to the consolidation and diversity of the Kingdom.

The process unfolded in stages and took several shapes and forms: it was first centered on administrative considerations closely related to the daily management of local citizens' needs in their relationship with territorial authorities. This approach required dynamic economic development in tune with the evolution of the Moroccan nation, with the aspirations of all its social components and their cultural specificities based on the territory's diversity and unity.

Regionalisation was then enshrined in the Constitution, in statutory instruments and even in municipal charters.

It is in this context that Morocco established a regional territorial administration "marked by the relics of the past, as a result of the modernization of ancestral institutions or the maintenance of institutions inherited from the protectorate and through innovations of various origins, including systems borrowed from abroad."

The foundations of Morocco's regional administration system or of the process of progressive establishment of local democracy were laid during the first decade after independence. This system evolved under the influence of the many major transformations that the Moroccan society underwent.

The creation in 1971 of seven economic regions allowed for the emergence of a type of regionalism that fostered harmony rather than separation.

The regionalisation process came back with a vengeance in the 1980s. King Hassan II had set the tone, stating his determination to endow the country with advanced regions along the model of

-The drafting of a “clear and well-defined” roadmap to ensure sound and progressive implementation of the project, with the help of qualified and competent bodies, and by mobilizing institutional mechanisms as well as other adequate and efficient development mechanisms.

-The drafting of a devolution charter that essentially provides for transfer to the regions of competences and necessary human and financial resources, since there cannot be regionalisation without devolution of powers.

-The active contribution of national political parties to the training and framing of elites to ensure good management of regional affairs.

### **Regionalisation in the context of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative for the Sahara Region**

Advanced and progressive regionalisation covering all the regions of Morocco, with the Sahara Region at the helm, is part of the political and economic momentum created by Morocco.

To several researchers and analysts the Autonomy Initiative and the impetus created at the international and the national levels were considered a strong boost and initiated a national discussion on local democracy in Morocco, particularly with a view to the creation of an institutional organisation more open towards the regional arena and Morocco’s neighbourhood.

This has been clearly enshrined in the mandate of the Commission entrusted with drafting the project whose main pillars can be found in the King’s speech dated January 3rd 2010. This mandate indeed outlines the general framework in which regionalisation should progress to bring about a purely Moroccan type of regionalisation.

In this context, Moroccan researcher Mohamed Darif stated in an interview given to the Jeune Afrique Magazine that even if “autonomy is a form of regionalisation, outside Southern Morocco regionalisation will not mean autonomy”.

Morocco is acting in keeping with the UN led search for a mutually acceptable political solution to the dispute over the Sahara. Hence the importance granted by Morocco to the establishment of a regional democratic framework to accompany and bolster the autonomy initiative in the Sahara. The aim is to prevent any practical difficulty that could stem from asymmetrical regionalisation between the Sahara region and the rest of Morocco.

The advanced regionalisation project will allow the Sahara provinces to preserve their particularities while keeping in mind the provisions contained in the autonomy initiative.

To this end, I do believe it is advisable to briefly ponder over a key issue which is the *raison d’être* of both projects, i.e. consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in Morocco, in the widest sense of the terms and in keeping with the reality of the country.

I shall not deal with the guarantees provided for by the Initiative in this area. The previous speakers gave an in-depth assessment of those. It however seems to me that if by definition advanced regionalisation allows for the realization of a range of rights, especially economic, social and cultural rights, the Autonomy Initiative for the Sahara contains just as many legal and constitutional guarantees for political and economic rights.

Of these rights, let me mention the right to self-determination that is fully covered by the Moroccan autonomy initiative, based on a modern and consensual approach to enhance the rights

of the Sahara population and ensure its full participation in the democratic management of local affairs.

It is this very consideration that made it possible in many cases to confirm that each situation of self-determination is unique and varies according to its historical and political context. Some 70 autonomy accords have been signed since 1945 but there isn't one single model prevailing.

The example of Aceh in Indonesia is the perfect case in point that shows how important it is to negotiate these institutional agreements taking into account the aspirations of all parties in so far as referenda often fail since they are often shrouded in violence and lead to small majorities. The first outcome of the negotiation between the Government of Indonesia and the GAM (the Free Aceh Movement) was an agreement identifying the prerequisites for transfer of power to the autonomous government, including on issues such as taxation and social structures.

A review of that case also demonstrated that the success of the negotiating process and the results of autonomy accords depend, *inter alia*, on the will of the negotiators, on their quality, on the support of neighbouring countries and that of the international community.

Power sharing also extends to identity. In 2009 eminent Professor François Heisbourg underscored at a seminar in Geneva that "discussing autonomy requires an in-depth analysis of power and the distribution of power". Professor Heisbourg's argument is based on the assumption that regional diversity allows for, and sometimes requires, power sharing such as in Federal States like Switzerland which showed that it is possible to cohesively manage multiple layers of competencies and various degrees of autonomy.

Morocco's Autonomy Initiative for the Sahara Region represents a modern and advanced political formula for the region. It is based on power sharing and fulfils the right to self-determination from a legal and political point of view. Autonomy therefore is an ideal political answer to reach a final and consensual solution to this regional dispute.

The success of the negotiation on this initiative is however heavily dependent on the support of neighbouring countries and particularly those directly involved in the conflict, on that of the international community, as well as on the pragmatism and realism of negotiators.

### **Effects of regionalisation and regional autonomy on Morocco and its neighbours**

Let me as a conclusion offer a few observations on the merits of both autonomy and regionalisation.

At the national level, advanced regionalisation and autonomy for the Sahara region would involve mutually reinforcing institutions which in turn would gradually lead to the required level of local democracy and rule of law in Morocco.

Both systems, through their contribution to regional development will help counterbalance the effects of globalization in the country in terms of economic and human resources, particularly through regional economic, social and cultural stimulus packages and plans to fight exclusion.

At the regional level, once accepted and implemented, autonomy will break the political and economic deadlock that is paralyzing cooperation between the countries of the Maghreb. This consensual solution will help liberate the region from the anachronic rut it is in.

Autonomy allows for liberalization and empowerment which, in fine, is in the interest of all countries and peoples of the region within a strong, well structured regional Maghreb, capable of tackling the many challenges related to peace, security and the promotion of human rights.

Regarding Morocco's Mediterranean neighbourhood and beyond the lessons and inspirations the Kingdom could draw from European models for the implementation of autonomy and the establishment of regionalisation, bringing these two projects to a successful conclusion could strengthen cooperation between the Maghreb region and its economic and trading partners throughout the world, especially in Europe, America and Asia.