



COUNTRY
BACKGROUND
SERIES

Morocco

The U.S. and Morocco continue to enjoy close relations, reinforced by a recent Free Trade Agreement and the signing of a Millennium Challenge Compact Agreement in 2007. Since taking the helm in 1999, King Mohammed VI has promulgated a number of social and economic reforms, bringing him international praise. Political reform, however, has not been pursued with the same vision. Parliament still has only limited powers with the monarchy enjoying veto power over all major decisions. Record low turnout in the most recent national elections reflects the growing detachment of Moroccan citizens from the political system.

I. General Interest

Morocco has long been a close U.S. ally. Since 9/11, both countries have strengthened ties in combating terrorism, increased trade, and boosted cooperation on a host of international issues. Although Morocco accounts for less than 1% of all U.S. trade, America is Morocco's third largest trading partner after France and Spain. A recent Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed between the two countries has seen bilateral trade rise steadily. Morocco receives a small but significant amount of foreign aid from the United States, estimated at \$27 million¹ for 2008. However, in August 2007, the U.S. signed a Millennium Challenge Compact Agreement² with Morocco for \$698 million over five years. Targeting tourism, agricultural and fisheries development, the grant has ushered in a new era of American investment in Morocco.

Since its independence in 1956, democracy has largely eluded Morocco. The late King Hassan II's 38-year reign was marked by a tightly controlled press and a weak, closely monitored opposition. It wasn't until the end of his reign in the mid-1990s that King Hassan began opening up the political system. After assuming power in 1999, King Mohammed VI instituted a number of social and economic reforms, changing the family law to grant women more rights, and launching an "equity and reconciliation commission" to shine light on past regime abuses. Morocco held its first free and fair parliamentary elections in 2002 and held similarly transparent elections in 2007. Despite these gains, the monarchy retains veto power over all major decisions.

II. Overview of U.S.-Morocco Relations

Morocco was the first country to recognize the United States in 1777 with a Treaty of Peace and Friendship following in 1786. Relations solidified during World War II with the arrival of U.S. troops in Casablanca to counter German-Italian inroads into North Africa. Although Morocco gradually drifted away from the U.S. towards

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the traditional French sphere of influence, the two countries maintained close relations during the Cold War. As a "strategic ally," the Reagan Administration provided significant military aid and public support to the Moroccan government in Western Sahara, where it was battling the soviet-backed POLISARIO nationalist movement.

In an effort to strengthen economic ties between the two countries, the Bush administration signed a Free Trade Agreement³ with Morocco in 2004. The FTA signified Washington's belief that open economies would lead to more tolerant societies.⁴ The administration also named Morocco a major non-NATO ally on June 3, 2004, making it eligible for greater access to defense systems. This growing embrace reflects the Bush administration's view of Morocco as a paradigm of Middle East reform. In a 2006 trip to Morocco, Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes called the kingdom an "important model for the wider region"⁵ and a country "at the forefront" of political reform.

III. Major Opposition Groups

Islamist Groups

Founded in 1985, the largest Islamist movement in Morocco remains Al Adl w'al Ihsan (Justice and Char-

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ity Movement), led by prominent Islamic thinker Sheikh Yassine. Repression of Al Adl has steadily intensified with members under constant surveillance and meetings routinely broken up. The group focuses on grassroots preaching and social change and eschews political participation due to its opposition to the monarchy, which it considers to be illegitimate.

While Al Adl has chosen to work outside of the political system, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) recognizes the king as “Commander of the Faithful” and is a registered political party. As the political arm of the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), the PJD entered parliament in 1997. Running in little more than half of the electoral districts in 2002, the party tripled its representation in parliament, bringing it to 42 seats. Many observers predicted the party would win a plurality of seats in the 2007 elections, but despite running candidates in nearly all 95 districts, the PJD [came in second place](#),⁶ picking up only five additional seats.

The PJD is believed to have lost some conservative supporters after moderating its tone in the wake of the May 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks. Favoring [pragmatism](#)⁷ over divisive ideological stances, the PJD has established itself as the dominant opposition party in parliament, seeking to weed out corruption while avoiding direct confrontation with the palace. Since the perceived failure of the 2007 elections, however, conservatives have grown more influential. In an attempt to rally its base in preparation for the 2009 municipal contests, the PJD has amplified its voice on perceived societal ills, such as alcohol consumption and prostitution. In February 2008, its youth wing launched a “[campaign for morality](#)”⁸ seeking to rally the country behind Islamic values which are portrayed as being under attack. Most recently, at the party’s 6th National Congress, the PJD elected a new secretary general, Abdelilah Benkirane, known for his strong support of the monarchy, his long service to the party, and his moral conservatism.

The U.S. government has generally enjoyed good relations with the PJD, and in the spring of 2006, brought the party’s former Secretary General Saad Eddin Othmani for a visit to Washington. The U.S.-PJD dialogue is one of the only current examples of sustained American engagement with Islamist opposition parties in the region.

Secular Groups

Morocco’s secular parties are among the oldest and most established in the region. However, as [some observers](#)⁹ point out, today they suffer from a dearth of internal

democracy and vision. As the record high rate of absenteeism in the latest elections indicates, they have also lost the confidence of the public, which largely views them as corrupt and self-serving.

The oldest opposition parties in the kingdom are the Istiqlal party and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which broke away from Istiqlal in 1959. As King Hassan grew suspicious of Arab socialism and wary of Istiqlal domination of party politics, he pushed for the formation of the heavily Berber, rural-based Popular Movement (MP) as well as the creation of various other pro-palace parties.

In 1998 – as part of an effort to open up political space to ease the impending transition of the throne – King Hassan brought the main opposition parties into government. Istiqlal and the USFP, along with the Party for Progress and Socialism (PPS), formed the *Kutla*, or bloc, which joined several other smaller parties in a governing coalition led by Socialist Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssefi. This well-played maneuver by the king transformed the traditional opposition into “government parties” and placed the onus and frustration for government paralysis squarely on the shoulders of the regime’s formerly stalwart critics.

Negotiations to form a governing coalition after the fall 2007 elections produced a shaky ruling coalition held together by just the Kutla and the pro-palace National Rally of Independents (RNI), with the parties coming in second and third in the elections – the PJD and the MP – choosing not to take part. In January 2008, Fouad Ali El Himma, former Deputy Interior Minister and close friend of the king, founded the Movement for all Democrats (MTD). The creation of a political party – Authenticity and Modernity – by the movement has pushed parties to form coalitions on both the left and right as they gear up for important municipal elections in 2009. Many smaller parties have already dissolved, after announcing their fusion with Authenticity and Modernity.

IV. Political Reform

Perceptions of Political Reform and U.S. Democracy Promotion

Rather than put direct pressure on Morocco to carry out political reforms, the U.S. is focusing on numerous political development programs. [USAID](#)¹⁰, [MEPI](#)¹¹ and the [National Endowment for Democracy](#)¹² (NED), the [National Democratic Institute](#)¹³ (NDI) and [International Republican Institute](#)¹⁴ (IRI) have all enjoyed an active

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presence in the kingdom. Most recently, NDI was invited by the Consultative Council on Human Rights (CCDH) to carry out the nation's first international observation mission.

Although Morocco is somewhat removed from regional issues such as the Iraq war and Arab-Israeli conflict, they continue to resonate due to satellite television. Popular opinion of the U.S. has plummeted, with 87% of Moroccans expressing an unfavorable view¹⁵ of the United States in 2006, a 23% increase from 2005.

Suspicion of American efforts to promote democracy remains widespread, with only 21% of the population having a positive view¹⁶ of U.S. democracy promotion. In mid-2006, a number of civil society groups launched a boycott of the U.S. Embassy and U.S.-funded programs. Recent missteps—such as a leaked pre-election poll by IRI predicting the PJD¹⁷ would take a plurality of seats in the 2007 elections—as well as the enormous unpopularity of American policy during the Israel-Lebanon war led to a groundswell of resistance¹⁸ to American initiatives. Many Moroccan journalists have routinely lashed out against “American interference” in the country's internal affairs. As the Islamist daily *Al-tajdid* proclaimed,¹⁹ U.S. assistance must be seen “in the context of a Greater Middle East Project of reforms endorsed by America to reformulate the Arab region in compliance to U.S. norms and interests.” Capitalizing on this wave of anti-Americanism, the PJD announced a refusal to take part in U.S.-funded assistance programs in the summer of 2006.

Despite this resistance – which has largely subsided – American NGOs continue to be active as they respond to Moroccans' desire for political reform. In the World Values Survey,²⁰ 81% of Moroccans said that democracy was a “very good” way to govern Morocco, with over 77% believing that democracy is better than any other system.

Political Institutions

The kingdom's first constitution, adopted in 1962, established a partially elected parliament and a multi-party system, but it was not until 1996 that a bi-cameral legislature²¹ was created. The 325-member House of Representatives is elected every five years, with 295 members chosen under a proportional electoral system and 30 female members selected at the national level under a 10% quota. The 270-member Upper House – indirectly elected from trade unions and other interest groups – enjoys the same influence in the lawmaking process as the Lower House (such as initiating laws), thus being seen by some

as a “source of duplication of efforts and inefficiencies”²² in the legislative system.

Constitutional amendments in 1992 and 1996 bolstered parliament's powers to question government officials and launch inquiries, as well as play a role in the budgetary process. Nonetheless, laws have to be given the royal stamp of approval before being passed. Overall, parliament still “lacks the ability to set its own agenda.”²³

Electoral law reforms in 2002 created a two-tiered proportional representation system, making it increasingly difficult for parties to win more than one seat²⁴ per district. The result is a parliament in which it is nearly impossible for any one party to win a majority of seats, which, in turn, leads to a weak and divided legislature. Recent amendments in 2007 focused on redistricting, giving more weight to rural constituencies – a move aimed at diminishing the power of the PJD whose largest constituencies are urban.

Prospects for Reform

King Mohammed VI has recently taken some positive steps towards political reform. For the first time in Morocco's history, international monitors were allowed into the country to observe the 2007 legislative elections. The king also kept his pledge to choose the prime minister from the party that received the most votes.

However, the record low turnout in the elections and high numbers of spoiled ballots sent a clear message that the current political system is detached from the populace and in dire need of structural reform. For his part, the king routinely invokes the widespread deficiencies of parties and the inability of the political elites to govern as reasons for the lack of progress. But many critics argue that until the parliament is given more meaningful powers²⁵ and political actors have a more active hand in policymaking, parties will be unable to fulfill their role.

Since the dominant role of the monarchy is enshrined in the constitution, meaningful change will require constitutional reform. However, this topic is a difficult one to address in an extensive patronage system where political leaders need to accept the prerogatives of the monarchy in order to maintain their positions and influence. This weakens the ability and inclination of the opposition to demand systemic reforms.

V. Congressional Policy and Foreign Assistance

Key Legislation

In the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2008 ([H.R. 2764 \[110th\]](#)),²⁶ the U.S. government provides \$3.7 million to Morocco, with an additional \$1 million conditional on the status of human rights conditions and freedom of speech and assembly concerning the status of the Western Sahara. Another \$15.4 million is given in Economic Support Funds (ESF).

Policy Outlook

On the question of political reform in Morocco, there remain two predominant strains of thought. One view is stridently critical of the king, doubts his commitment to reform, and is skeptical that necessary political changes will be instituted in the near future. The other enthusiastically hails King Mohammed as “reform-minded” and paints a rosy picture of the state of democratization in Morocco. Quick to list off the social and economic reforms undertaken by the king, this camp fails to acknowledge that similar initiatives towards political liberalization have not been carried out at the same pace. Unfortunately, making King Mohammed the poster child for Arab reform before significant political change has occurred actually takes the pressure off,²⁷ rather than the other way around.

Recent American efforts to condition aid on human rights improvements in Western Sahara are laudable, as is continued assistance targeting political party strengthening and legislature capacity building; however, renewed diplomatic pressure will also need to be part of the mix.

Adding to this challenge has been the inclination of major European countries to leave democratization out of their agenda²⁸ for North Africa. As long as France and Spain – who by themselves carry as much clout as the U.S. – let business ties and other economic interests take precedence over support for democracy, American calls for political liberalization will likely fall on deaf ears. A U.S. strategy geared towards convincing its allies to get on board would be a step in the right direction.

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The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East.

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