



Morocco dabbles with devolution as means to quell discontent

Cities to gain powers, regions next

BY ALAE EDDIN SERRAR

DEVOLUTION IN MOROCCO IS THE FOCUS OF A MOMENTOUS national debate that if successful, could result in bringing government services much closer to this restive people.

The focus of the debate is aimed at amending the law governing municipalities. With many social and political actors involved in the discussions, including ordinary citizens, elected officials, government and civil society and none other than King Mohammed VI himself, changes to the law could come soon. Others could follow.

When King Mohammed succeeded his father to the throne in July 1999, there was an atmosphere of optimism and the process of democratization began. But the pace of the democratization and decentralization has not always kept up with people's expectations.

The benefits of the reforms of 1999 and the impending changes in governance and services for poorer citizens did not, nor could they possibly, change Morocco's social conditions overnight. More than 4.2 million of the country's 34 million people live on less than \$1 per person a day. As well, 38 per cent of the population is illiterate, 1.7 million people live in shanty towns and 11 per cent of working-age young people are unemployed.

Terrorists attack

Little more than five years ago, with these alarming social indicators as a backdrop, several radical Islamist groups were successfully recruiting underprivileged youth in Morocco. In May 2003, the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country's history conflagrated in Casablanca. A total of 12 suicide bombers died, along with 33 civilians, and 100 were injured. Another seven suicide bombers blew themselves up in Casablanca in March and April 2007. In both cases, most of the bombers were from the shanty towns of Sidi Moumen in the suburbs of Casablanca.

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King Mohammed VI of Morocco makes a point at a recent Arab League summit in Tunisia. The King's participation is often the key to the success of a project in Morocco.

Response to roots of the attacks

The king stepped in. In Morocco, the king's support is often crucial to whether a reform project goes through or not. In formal politics, under the constitution of Morocco, the king can appoint the prime minister and the cabinet after a democratic election, and can dismiss any cabinet minister. In informal politics, the involvement of the monarch can launch a political project on its way to success.

After the first attacks, the king launched the National Initiative for Human Development to place social issues at the top of the country's priorities. This initiative was aimed at empowering citizens to participate in decision-making at the local level.

In a speech in July 2006, the monarch said there was a strategic need to evaluate Morocco's "experience in local democracy, and to explore possibilities to enlarge the space for democratic

practice, (and) to give a new impulse to decentralization and regionalization dynamics so that decentralized management of public services becomes a basic rule.”

In layman’s terms, the king was calling for broadening of democracy in his country and for decentralization.

In light of this speech, and with municipal elections coming in 2009, the Ministry of the Interior launched a national debate to reform the law governing municipalities in Morocco, known as the Communal Charter.

This was to be an important step toward enabling local governments to improve delivery of services to citizens and create a more inclusive and transparent management style at the local level. Since then, more than 20 legal experts have fanned out, holding workshops in the country’s 16 regions, involving the leaders and members of local communes, members of civil society groups and citizens.

The discussions and the debate centre on one topic: reforming the Communal Charter. These consultations are focusing on clearly defining powers at the subnational level; protecting local autonomy; and providing the necessary funding and trained staff for municipal governments.

Clearer powers

Subnational governments in Morocco come in three forms:

- the municipality (led by a mayor elected for a six-year term),
- the province (led by an appointed governor),
- the region (led by a regional appointed by the king).

While the regions have been given significant responsibilities in social assistance and economic development matters, municipalities have been granted similar responsibility over socio-economic development through the 2002 Communal Charter. Yet, this law did not specify how overlapping responsibilities in socio-economic matters are to be shared.

Nor did the Communal Charter specify functions or relations within the locally elected councils in major cities like Casablanca, Rabat, Marrakech and Tangiers. In these four cities, there is a single municipal council – headed by an elected mayor with exclusive fiscal authority – which sits atop several local municipalities.

In Morocco, a local municipality (*commune* in Moroccan French) can be either an independent municipality in the countryside or a municipal district within a large metropolis. The resulting ambiguity between the city and the municipali-

ties has been a key obstacle confounding efficient and democratic decentralized management.

Protecting local autonomy

Morocco’s urban and rural municipal governments are governed primarily by Article 69 of the Communal Charter which contains a long list of municipal council decisions that require pre-approval by the Ministries of Finance and the Interior, in the case of urban communes; and of the regional governor or the governor in the case of rural communes. This mandatory pre-approval covers almost every expenditure line item. It even extends to the naming of city streets. The law defines the precise procedures that need to be followed for such pre-approval and stipulates sanctions for any violation of the procedures by the local communes.

During one confrontation in 2006, the governor of the city of Meknes rejected the program that the elected municipal council had developed to reflect local citizens’ priorities, which council members had promised to address during the election campaign. Instead, the governor used the nationally determined plan, as set

by the central authorities, to design and implement local development projects.

Prof. El Manar Esslimi of Mohammed V University in Rabat, one of the specialists working on the reforms of the Communal Charter, said the coming reforms will have the effect of pressuring central authorities for “less concern about legal compliance with formal rules at



A victim of the May 2003 suicide bombing in Casablanca is carried to an awaiting hearse. Thirty-nine people were killed and scores injured in the bombings.

the local level, and a more strategic role in monitoring and evaluating local performance in delivering services.” He added that there will also be provisions to encourage citizens’ involvement as the most efficient mechanism for accountability and oversight.

Saad Guerrouani, the youngest member of the municipal council of Martil, a town in northern Morocco, stated in an interview that “the new reforms should necessarily reflect the trust that citizens have expressed when they voted for us.”

“Heavy control hinders our capacity to program and execute investments in a timely and effective manner.”

“Our hands are now handcuffed ... they should be released so that we can serve our communes better,” Guerrouani added.

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Empowering local governments to deliver better services leads to one important question: are the financial and human resource capabilities sufficient to meet the challenges that the country is facing? Morocco's rapid urbanization is accompanied by an increasing need for municipal investment in the areas of infrastructure, sanitation, water and electricity services, transportation and urban development.

"The investment needed to meet increasing demand would require not only an increase in (its) own (internally generated) revenues, but improved ability to borrow and attract private investment," said Mostapha El Haya, a

member of the majority in the Casablanca City Council, in an interview with the Casablanca newspaper *Al Masae* on March 15. "It would also require stronger municipal human resources capability," said Said Essaadi, an opposition member of the city's council, in an interview with *Al Masae* on the same day.

Prospects for regional autonomy

With moves to amend the urban laws and to provide financial and human resources for cities and towns, municipal government reform is off to a good start in Morocco. The next area for the legislature to take on will most likely be regional government, a reform that might possibly begin in the unlikely location of Western Sahara.

However, any effort to accelerate decentralization or regional autonomy in Morocco through reforming decentralization laws will not be sufficient if accompanying measures are not implemented. Other legislation, such as the law governing political parties and the electoral law need to be reviewed to include more democratic practices and procedures inside political parties and to reduce corrupt practices during elections. Such a review should not only reduce vote buying and corruption during elections, but should also contribute to improved democratic and transparent procedures inside political parties, which would encourage more qualified candidates to run for municipal seats. 