

Morocco's great return to the African Union

By Abdellah Saaf

Summary

Morocco's ties with Africa through various aspects have never been broken. There is no need to prove its roots within deep history. However, the recent developments constitute a major event of important significance. Is it a turning point, a victory that concludes a diplomatic episode among others, a normalization, a response to cyclical difficulties, a booster, an inflection point, or a major event?

A major initiative

The historic reintegration of the Kingdom into the African Union was endorsed at the Pan-African Organization's 28th Summit in Addis Ababa on January 30 and 31, 2017, with the almost unanimous support of African Heads of State and on the basis of a very simple argument: Morocco is an African country, having ratified the Constitution of the Continental Organization, deposited its instruments of ratification, and which, in accordance with Article 29 of the above-mentioned Act, has the support of at least 28 countries. According to this provision, "any African State may, at any time after the entry into force of this Act, notify the Chairman of the Commission of its intention to accede to this Act and to be admitted as a member of the Union"... and admission "shall be decided by a simple majority of the Member States"¹. Around forty countries supported the return of Morocco on the eve of the summit, and it was finally accepted by consensus. In other words, Morocco was able to obtain "frank and massive support" in the King's own words, in regaining its place within the African Union².

It is unquestionably a major victory, which has overcome various incidents of obstruction, opposition, and indeterminateness. The royal will, like an imperious river, has swept away all the obstacles that stood in its way, overflowing on all sides the inclinations of various oppositions: from the president of the African Commission of the African Union's omission to communicate Morocco's request, to the multiple upstream maneuvers, the constant disinformation, and the famous episode of the memorandum of January 2017, which contained a legal opinion trying to curb the Moroccan effort³.

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From Morocco's point of view, it is clear that reintegration into the African Union can in no way be understood as a recognition of the so-called SADR. History attests that one of Morocco's characteristics is that it was not a

1. See the Constitutive Act of the African Union.

2. Speech in Addis Ababa on January 30, 2017, at the summit session, which endorsed Morocco's return. See *Jeune Afrique* n°2926 dated February 5- 11, 2017,

pp.18-21.

3. On the legal opinion, see *Maroc Hebdo*, n°1196, date February 3 - 9, 2017. See also *Tel Quel*, n°750, dated February 3 – 9, 2017.

colonial creation, but instead a state that has grown its roots over a period of centuries. International law teaches that the fact that when a State belongs to an international organization in which an entity that it does not recognize also belongs, it does not imply its recognition of that entity, as is shown in practice by the example of the Arab and Muslim countries vis-à-vis Israel within the United Nations. Moreover, Morocco manages the question of its territorial integrity within the UN bodies. It should also be noted that for the time being, no request for exclusion has been included in the Moroccan reintegration process.

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The reintegration of Morocco into the African Union is a strategic political achievement and a central and decisive work by HM Mohamed VI. For the observer of Moroccan political life since the sovereign's accession, the manner in which he has patiently constructed the Kingdom's international policy is truly impressive. It is a diplomatic construction that he has personally led since his accession to the throne.

This return is not a new emergence by Morocco in Africa, as demonstrated by the long history of its relations with the African Union, from its initial concept to its later forms. Already, in August 1960, the late King Mohamed V, the King's grandfather, when receiving the Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, assured him of the Kingdom's unconditional support: "You are on the side of law and justice which always end in triumph⁴. This solidarity was not a matter of diplomatic-speak, an outward vow, decorum, or a purely formal position, but instead it was the expression of the country's profound sense of the just African struggles. In January 1961, Casablanca welcomed the African heads of state, who adopted the Casablanca charter during their visit⁵, a prelude to the establishment of the OAU two years later, in which Morocco took an active part.

In November 1984, Morocco left the Organization of the African Union (OAU) after the so-called SADR became a member. In the context of that period, the withdrawal

4. See "Le Maroc et l'Occident" by Berramdane Abdelkhaleq. Paris, Karthala, 1987, 146 et s.

5. See "L'Organisation de l'Unité Africaine" by Boutros Ghali. Paris, Armand Colin, 1968.

from the OAU seemed necessary. The landscape offered by the continent did not allow Morocco to do otherwise. Already in 1982, the so-called SADR was admitted as the 51st member of the OAU, deemed illegal by Morocco, which succeeded in boycotting the Tripoli Summit by 24 of the 54 member countries in the organization. One can understand the reasoning behind the decision by the late King Hassan II to leave the African organization. The cost of this departure was evidently high: the diplomacy of the country was put in a difficult situation for approximately 32 years. Diplomats hostile to Morocco were given free rein for their views and undertakings.

Morocco has nevertheless continued to manage the situation at a distance, or from behind the scenes and through allies, with ups and downs. Subsequently, remote hand-to-hand combat became difficult as powerful states of the continent increased their influence. Observers, including friends of Morocco, have repeatedly criticized what they have called Morocco's "empty chair policy."

Official maps of the African Union have even erased the Moroccan territory from the continent, replacing it with an unbelievable "republic of sand," drowning North Africa within the immense Algeria, and symbolic positions for the remaining parts of the Maghreb⁶.

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Despite everything, the balance of power was constantly changing on the continent. New political leadership situations were emerging: all sorts of difficulties arose, the demise of many African leaders, the aging and illness of some, disputes or uprisings of others, the destabilization of entire regions, civil wars, conflicts, disorder, and institutional changes. New power structures were established within each country one by one, at both regional and international levels. New political, economic, social and cultural issues were prioritized. The impact of ideological residue or political connections of previous decades decreased significantly.

When Morocco announced its intention to return to the African Union in July 2016, it was a turning point of great significance. The King's patient development of

6. See "Sahara marocain. Le dossier d'un conflit artificiel" by Charles Saint-Prot, Jean-Yves Cara de, and Christophe Boutin. Rabat, Edition Marsam, 2016.

bilateral relations with African countries had not provided visibility for any observer to foresee the possibility of this reorientation. The Moroccan request represented an unexpected and significant change of direction. In any case, as the first reactions of the opposing parties demonstrate, Morocco's opponents were surprised by the Moroccan diplomatic offensive.

Efforts to strengthen Moroccan-African relations

After leaving the African organization, the Kingdom remained very close to many African countries in various difficult circumstances as their friend and ally, as referenced in the speech in Addis Ababa⁷. The ties remained consistent and allowed for significant bilateral relations. It was as if Morocco's decision to leave the African organization had positive effects on consolidating Morocco's relations with the African continent. The King strongly emphasized this during the speech delivered after Morocco's readmission to the summit in Addis Ababa on January 31: "The withdrawal has made it possible to refocus Morocco's actions in the continent." The fact that it left the African Union in 1984 did not prevent its Africanness: "Morocco never felt more African as when it left the African Union," according to His Royal Highness, encouraging the expansion of its efforts to develop the continent⁸.

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All the debts of the least developed countries were forgiven 16 years ago. Similarly, tariff barriers on products from countries on the continent were lifted. An impressive system of conventions has been developed over time. The royal speech in Addis Ababa recounts: "Since 2000, Morocco has concluded, in various fields of cooperation, nearly a thousand agreements with African countries ... Between 1956 and 1999, 515 agreements had been signed, and since 2000 there have been 949"⁹, an apparatus of conventions that the King personally promoted through his numerous visits to the different sub-regions in the hemisphere (46 visits in 25 African countries). Morocco is now the second largest investor in Africa. Furthermore,

7. Speech in Addis Ababa in January 2017.

8. *ibid*

9. *ibid*

the issue of training is perceived as the heart of Moroccan cooperation with Africa. Many African nationals have been able to pursue tertiary education in Morocco, thanks to the thousands of scholarships awarded¹⁰.

The King of Morocco has also prioritized major projects of strategic importance. One of the most significant is the African Atlantic Gas Pipeline project, initiated by the Sovereign with the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. This project should allow gas to be transported from producer countries to Europe with beneficial effects for the whole of West Africa. Another example is the implementation of the Cocody Bay redevelopment project in Abidjan as part of a new model of cooperation between the relevant public enterprises in Morocco and Côte d'Ivoire, with active involvement by the private sector in the two countries, etc.¹¹

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Morocco's cooperation policy prioritizes the social dimension. Morocco's pragmatic approach prioritizes actions that have a direct impact on the daily lives of populations. Morocco exports medicines while building pharmaceutical laboratories; builds health facilities and centers; develops infrastructure and vocational and technical training centers; and implements projects that generate jobs and stable incomes, such as for fishing villages and support for small farmers.

The profoundly humanistic orientations defined by the sovereign in the continent can be illustrated by the migratory policy he initiated towards the African populations that have been led to the Kingdom and other destinations due to precariousness. The King has authored of an unprecedented and generous welcome policy. Various generous actions toward immigrants have strengthened the ties already formed.

10. See "Relations Maroc-Afrique subsaharienne : quel bilan pour les quinze dernières années ?" by Lo Moubarack. Research paper, RP-16/ 10, OCP Policy Center, Rabat, 2016. See also "Structure des échanges entre le Maroc et l'Afrique : une analyse de la spécialisation du commerce" by Rim Berahab. Research paper, RP-16/07, OCP Policy Center, Rabat, 2016.

11. See "La diplomatie des phosphates" in Maroc Hebdo, no. 1189, December 9 – 15, 2016.

There is remarkable continuity and coherence in the royal approach compared to previous approaches. In his speech in Addis Ababa, the sovereign reiterated his intention to give no credence to the idea that Morocco's only aim is to acquire leadership in Africa with this strong involvement. He affirmed: "some argue that with this commitment, Morocco would aim to acquire leadership in Africa. I reply that the Kingdom seeks to give leadership to Africa. " Morocco did not adopt the doctrines of regional power at Bismarck. The Kingdom has repeatedly reiterated its determination to seek stability in Africa, translating it into effective action on the ground. Thus, the country has contributed to several United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa (six), deploying thousands of men (5,000) in the various operations: Moroccan troops have so far been deployed in CAR and DRC in addition to the mediations that it is leading with regard to Libya (the Skhirat agreements) and in the Mano River basin area.

Faith in Africa's future

The profound philosophy that drives the sovereign in his African strategy can be recalled here. In the speech of the last commemoration of "the revolution of the King and the people"¹², the King used significant words. Africa is not only a geographical and historical position, but also more of an emotional, human and spiritual attachment, translatable into concrete relations of cooperation and solidarity. As Morocco's natural prolongation and strategic depth, it can only be at the center of its foreign policy.

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Of course, the Kingdom has become a significant player. The national cause remains undoubtedly at the heart of this African policy directly led by the King, but it is laid out within the framework of an overall strategic vision in which it considers that Africa should be more self-confident. The King wants to work within North-South cooperation where Africa would not be perceived as simply a "pool of opportunities". The sovereign reaffirms in substance that Africa's wealth must benefit Africa: "Africa can be proud of its human potential, its resources, its cultural heritage,

12. Royal speech on August 20, 2016.

its spiritual values and the future must bear loudly this natural pride in order to envision Africa's future with confidence and serenity, counting on its own wealth and the "hands" of its citizens. Propose a "growth model."¹³ Morocco's return to the African Union thus marks a great historic achievement by His Royal Highness, of considerable strategic importance in several respects, which analysis and prospecting must take into consideration.

Reintegration into the African Union

The return brings about new stakes and challenges, and calls for new approaches. How to define this return? How to think, manage, and structure it? In any case, Morocco cannot be reduced to the Sahara issue.

Some observations draw attention:

Bilateralism has proven to be an effective approach. As the royal speech emphasizes, it is a matter of continuing to patiently build on the work undertaken at the bilateral level. The milestones are already set. This bilateralism has had an impact on the evolution of the African political landscape in Morocco's favor. Diplomatic success owes as much to this active, proactive, transformist bilateralism as it does to the political changes that have taken place on the continent.

It seems that a new phase is beginning:

The driving force behind the founding bilateralism, which strongly bound it to many countries, can be consolidated by the prospects of multilateralism, which calls for the Moroccan approach. The new period that begins, succeeding the one where bilateralism took precedence, can inaugurate a new impetus marked by multilateralism. It can be a new start that does not replace bilateralism. Morocco will need to find the appropriate mode of action for this multilateralism, and to invest its aspects, its entities (its bodies, parliament, court of human rights, etc.), and in its civil society, to reappropriate documentation, a repository, practices, an accumulation of institutional life, and an organizational culture.

The question arises of how to articulate all of this through a broad strategy of development, emergence, and structural

13. Ibid

transformation, through a search for convergence of public policies and different visions at work in different national fields.

It is important to reflect on this return within the current context where the concept of security on a global scale seems to be called upon to undergo significant mutations, marked by the rise of populist governments of a new type. Under the present conditions, it is not known if isolationism or greater involvement prevails, an era marked by the return of state sovereignties or the defeat of a certain vision dominated by international organizations. The character of this “transitional” period at the beginning of 2017 is accentuated. This return therefore requires work at different levels, a great ability to adapt, and patience.

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The views expressed in this publication are the views of the author.



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