The Politics of Morocco

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Introduction

Morocco stands as a unique case in the Arab world: a kingdom where tradition and modernity intersect, and where centuries-old dynastic rule meets the pressures of 21st-century governance. The political system of the Kingdom of Morocco is often described as a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. However, beneath this surface, the distribution and exercise of power reveal a complex interplay between formal institutions, informal networks, and a monarchy deeply intertwined with the state’s identity. Understanding Moroccan politics requires exploring this blend of constitutional frameworks, historical legacies, and the evolving aspirations of its citizens.

In the past two decades, Morocco has witnessed significant political and constitutional reforms. Spurred by both domestic calls for change and regional movements like the Arab Spring, the 2011 Constitution was designed to modernize institutions, deepen citizen participation, and incrementally shift certain powers away from the King. Nevertheless, the core of Moroccan political life still rotates around the monarchy and the person of King Mohammed VI, who wields substantial influence over the judiciary, the security apparatus, religious guidance, and the overall political direction of the country. This paradox—of reform alongside enduring royal dominance—remains at the heart of the Moroccan political experience.

Morocco’s multipartite political landscape reflects the country’s diversity but also its challenges. Political parties, spanning a range of secular and religious outlooks, compete in regular elections that draw both hope and skepticism. While legislative and executive authorities exhibit genuine elements of representation, many Moroccans perceive the elections as insufficiently powerful to fundamentally shape national policy. The boundaries of political action are tightly defined, not only by constitutional provisions but by unsaid red lines regarding Islam, the monarchy, and territorial integrity. These constraints shape the vibrancy, yet also the limits, of Morocco's parliamentary and political life.

Questions of human rights and political freedoms often stand in uncomfortable juxtaposition with Morocco's carefully managed image of gradual reform. The state’s commitment to good governance is tested by persistent issues: media and speech restrictions, judicial independence, corruption, and ongoing incidents of repression against critics and activists. At the same time, a robust legacy of civil society activism, the increasing visibility of women and youth in public life, and some advances in legal protections create an undeniable sense of movement, however restrained. Morocco’s state and society exist in a constant negotiation between innovation and preservation.

Adding further complexity, Morocco’s administrative architecture combines deep centralization with efforts at regionalization. The role of local governance, the function of the Walis and governors, and the promise of decentralized power all influence how citizens experience the state, especially outside major cities. The unresolved conflict over Western Sahara introduces another dimension, impacting foreign policy, national debate, and the lived reality of many Moroccans and Sahrawis alike.

This book, "The Politics of Morocco: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Morocco," provides a comprehensive overview of the historical roots, institutional structures, key political actors, and evolving debates that define Morocco today. Its aim is to equip readers—whether students, observers, or participants—with the frameworks needed to understand Morocco’s past, grasp its current challenges, and contemplate the possible paths of its political future.

CHAPTER ONE: The Deep Roots of the Makhzen

To understand the political landscape of modern Morocco, one must first delve into the deep currents of its history. It's a history shaped by geography, marked by successive waves of people, and defined by the enduring struggle for central authority over a diverse collection of tribes and regions. Before the arrival of Islam, the area now known as Morocco was inhabited by indigenous Berber tribes, who had established various kingdoms and confederations. These early political structures, often centered around powerful tribal groups like the Sanhaja, Masmuda, and Zenata, laid some of the groundwork for the future political dynamics of the region.

The arrival of the Phoenicians and later the Carthaginians brought coastal settlements and their associated forms of trade and governance, but their influence remained largely confined to these areas. The Roman Empire followed, annexing the northern part of Morocco as the province of Mauretania Tingitana, with Volubilis as its capital. Roman rule, however, primarily extended over the northern coastal plains and valleys, and faced constant resistance from Berber tribes in the interior. Even during the period of Roman control, indigenous monarchs maintained influence in the hinterland.

The 7th century CE saw the arrival of Islam, a pivotal moment that would profoundly reshape Morocco's political and social fabric. The initial Muslim conquest brought Arabic language and Islam to the region, though local Berber tribes largely retained their customary laws. Governors were initially appointed by the larger Islamic Caliphates, but the region soon asserted its independence.

The Idrisid dynasty, founded in 788 by Idris I, is often credited with establishing the first Moroccan state. Idris I, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, fled to the Maghreb and was welcomed by the Awraba Berbers. He and his son, Idris II, unified various Arab and Berber groups and established Fez as their capital, which became a significant political and religious center. The Idrisids were the first to create a central government that included both Arabs and Berbers, laying the foundation for a more unified political structure. However, after the death of Idris II, the kingdom fragmented, and the dynasty's power waned, eventually succumbing to the pressures of rival powers.

Following the decline of the Idrisids, Morocco experienced a period of fragmentation with various Berber tribes and principalities holding sway. This era set the stage for the rise of powerful Berber dynasties that would control vast empires.

The Almoravids, emerging from the Sanhaja Berber tribes in the Sahara in the mid-11th century, were the first of these. Driven by religious zeal, they unified

Morocco and established an empire that stretched across the western Maghreb and into Al-Andalus (parts of modern-day Spain and Portugal). They founded Marrakech as their capital and solidified the prominence of the Maliki school of Sunni Islam in Morocco. The Almoravid state was characterized by a strong tribal hierarchy and a system of government where military commanders held administrative roles.

The Almohads, another Berber dynasty, rose in the 12th century, challenging and eventually overthrowing the Almoravids. Founded on the teachings of Ibn Tumart, the Almohads also established a vast empire encompassing the Maghreb and Al-Andalus. They centralized power and implemented a more bureaucratic system, while still maintaining a political and social framework based on Berber tribal hierarchy. The Almohads also placed a strong emphasis on justice and the rule of law, based on Islamic legal principles.

The Marinid dynasty, a Zenata Berber tribe, succeeded the Almohads in the 13th century. They focused on consolidating their power in Morocco and engaging with the Iberian Peninsula, though they were eventually pushed back. The Marinids, with Fez as their capital, supported Islamic scholarship and contributed to the development of Moroccan architecture. This period also saw increased interaction with European powers, particularly along the coast.

Following the Marinids, the Wattasids, a related Zenata tribe, held nominal power for a period, but their authority was limited, and the country saw a rise in the influence of local leaders and religious figures known as marabouts. This fragmentation and weakness left Morocco vulnerable to external pressures.

The Saadi dynasty, an Arab Sharifian dynasty claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad, emerged in the 16th century, capitalizing on the widespread desire for leadership against Portuguese incursions along the coast. They unified Morocco, expelled the Portuguese from many coastal cities, and established a strong centralized state, with Marrakech as their capital for much of their rule. The Saadians were the first Arab dynasty to rule Morocco since the Idrisids and established a model of political-religious legitimacy based on Sharifian lineage that would continue to be significant. Their reign also saw interactions with European powers and expansion southward.

The decline of the Saadians in the 17th century led to a period of civil war and fragmentation. It was out of this turmoil that the Alawi dynasty, the current ruling family of Morocco, rose to power. Also claiming Sharifian descent, the Alawis consolidated control over Morocco, establishing a dynasty that has endured to the present day. The Alawis, under leaders like Moulay Rachid and Moulay Ismail, worked to centralize the state and assert its authority over various regions and tribes.

This long history of successive dynasties, tribal dynamics, and the interplay between

central authority and regional autonomy has profoundly shaped the Moroccan political system. The concept of the Makhzen, a term referring to the central government and the informal networks of power surrounding the Sultan or King, has its roots in these centuries of state formation and power consolidation. Even as Morocco moved towards the modern era and faced the challenges of colonialism, the legacy of these historical power structures and the enduring significance of the monarchy remained potent forces. The relationship between the ruler, the tribes, religious legitimacy, and the struggle for control over territory and resources are themes that echo throughout Morocco's political history and continue to influence its present.

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