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The Moroccan diaspora: What are the modes of political participation?

→ Anas El Hasnaoui



Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) attend the opening ceremony of The Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies in Rabat, Morocco on February 08, 2018. © AA/Jalal Morchidi



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Moroccans living abroad now amount to nearly 4.2 million people, i.e., 10% of the Moroccan population.¹ This community, dubbed “Moroccans of the World” (*Marocains du monde - MDM*), has now grown its status.² Today, it is characterized both by its establishment in diverse locations and its feminization thanks to individual strategies by highly skilled and highly educated women. Moroccans of the World are young and highly qualified individuals in several fields. They are a significant player in the national economy, with an average annual contribution of 10% of the GDP, the first in terms of revenue, ahead of the official development assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investments.

For decades, these characteristics have captured the interest of political authorities, which have developed various strategies and institutional frameworks to mobilize the resources and skills of Moroccans abroad, especially in finance and technology. The goal is to promote and value migrant participation in their country of origin through “mobilization,” which refers, in this context, to proactive action by the State towards its diaspora. Morocco has used several methods to engage the diaspora in the country’s development. With varying degrees of effectiveness, some mobilization practices seem to stand out in the sports, cultural, social, and economic fields thanks to some incentives, but political participation remains very limited and controversial since the 1990s. The new development model continues to undermine full diaspora participation in public policy. Without a clear institutional framework that enables legitimate representation and clearly defined areas of intervention, the issue of the Moroccan diaspora’s participation in public policy will remain unresolved.

Channelling the Moroccan diaspora for development objectives

The participation of Moroccans abroad in the country’s development can be divided into three main phases that reflect the different approaches and levels of engagement offered by public authorities. Until the end of the 1980s, the diaspora was institutionally considered a prong of the employment policy; they were described as Moroccan workers abroad.³ The intermediation structures between them and their country of origin were associative structures overseen by Moroccan

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authorities at both ends. The significance of Moroccans abroad as providers of funds has always been evident. This system focused very early on setting up a network of dedicated agencies in the Moroccan consulates and embassies in countries with a large Moroccan diaspora.

Towards the late 1980s, and especially in the early 1990s, the migration institutional structure saw the creation of the first ministerial department for Moroccans Residing Abroad and the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad. In addition to focusing on the cultural and social dimensions to enhance ties between Moroccans of the World and their country of origin, the Hassan II Foundation highlighted the role of Moroccan migrants as economic actors and developed programs to support them. As such, the issue of diaspora mobilization by the State drew the interest of various concerned players. It was reflected in several programs and initiatives implemented in host countries and Morocco, as an antidote for the brain drain.

Since the mid-2000s, the mobilization process has accelerated in form and substance. It was a new political landscape marked by two major events: the participation of political opposition in the government (1997-2002) for the first time since Morocco's independence, and the coronation of a young King Mohammed VI in 1999. New doors would open, including those in favour of opposition figures living abroad and in political exiles. This new phase was globally marked by the emergence of the Brain Gain and Brain Change approach, a positive approach to migration as a driver of development in both the host and homeland communities.

At the institutional level, several milestones were recorded: the re-establishment of the Ministry in charge of Moroccans Residing Abroad (as of 2002), the creation of the National Migrants Day, the establishment of the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME) (2006), and the launch of the International Forum of Moroccan Competencies Abroad (FINCOME) (2003-2009). Similarly, in December 2007, Morocco organized a conference that resulted in the creation of the Moroccan Invest Network, the adoption of a new strategy with three focal points (remittances, mobilization of competencies, and co-development, including the contribution of civil society organizations), and the implementation of a program for Moroccan skills.



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Amid this institutional boom, the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME) was set up. As a consultative body on public policy regarding Moroccans of the World, it has addressed key issues that gave a better understanding of migration.

This was the first form of broad participation, supervised and led by a national institution. It was structured under six working groups: Scientific, Technical and Economic Skills for Inclusive Development; Citizenship and Political Participation; Administration, Public Rights of Users and Policies; Worship and Religious Education; and Gender Approach and New Generations. The mobilization of Moroccans abroad has also attracted international cooperation. Great importance was given to recognizing and promoting the economic and entrepreneurial role of the Moroccan diaspora as well as their practices as a player in local development. Although this model was expanded as of 2011 with constitutional reforms in favour of the political participation of migrants, the ensuing reforms are yet to be implemented.

The new development model: Another call for Moroccan diaspora participation?

Following the 2011 constitutional reforms, the participation of Moroccans in the development of their homeland was enshrined as a constitutional right. The president of the CCME was one of the members of the commission in charge of the constitutional reform process. Furthermore, the CCME consulted Moroccan migrants on the wording of provisions to be integrated into the new Constitution.⁴ Their participation constitutionalized the CCME and set forth clear clauses on the role and rights of Moroccans of the World.

Therefore, Article 16 of the Constitution could be interpreted as Morocco's commitment to protecting the rights and interests of Moroccans abroad by reaffirming the country's will to preserve and advance human ties with the Kingdom as well as to increase their contribution to Morocco's development. The Constitution also recognizes the rights of citizenship of Moroccans residing abroad, including their right to vote and be elected (Article 17). It also confirms the commitment of public authorities to ensure broad diaspora participation as much

⁴ The Moroccan diaspora: What are the modes of political participation?



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as possible in the country's advisory bodies and good governance (Article 18). Finally, Article 163 recognizes the CCME's key role in advising on public policy regarding the Moroccan diaspora.

This constitutional recognition has created government momentum to implement programs and actions in favour of Moroccans of the World and expanded the potential for participation. However, it highlighted the paradox between recognizing political participation and failing to implement this principle.

In this specific context of migration,⁵ linked to questioning the outcomes of development policies over the last two decades, a national debate was launched by a royal directive on a new development model for Morocco. A commission of 35 experts – seven of whom are Moroccans of the World, was created to frame and lead the debate and report to the King.⁶

On 25 May 2021, the Special Commission on the Development Model submitted its report titled: “The New Development Model, Releasing Energies and Regaining Trust to Accelerate the March of Progress and Prosperity for All.” It comprises five constituent levers for the development model: diversifying economic action, strengthening human capital, governance and inclusivity, territorialization, and the contribution of the Moroccans of the World. Nevertheless, this new formula for the participation of the Moroccan diaspora does not solve the controversial issue of the political participation of the Moroccans of the World.

Political participation: A Controversy

After a short-lived experience of diaspora representation in Parliament,⁷ the issue only resurfaced in 2005, when King Mohammed VI outlined a new migration strategy that defines Moroccans of the World as a “major asset to the new Morocco” in a speech. This strategy was built on four pillars, allowing Moroccans living abroad to be represented in the House of Representatives, to create parliamentary constituencies abroad, to exercise the right to vote and be elected, and to establish a Supreme Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad.

Despite this rhetoric, the same debate has resurfaced in the lead-up to every parliamentary election. Between 2005 and September 2021 parliamentary

⁵ The Moroccan diaspora: What are the modes of political participation?



election, the participation issue remained in limbo with no relevant decisions being taken. Moroccans living abroad were only able to participate in the 2011 referendum regarding constitutional reforms. Article 17 of the Constitution was not translated into action. Moreover, the recommendations of the report on the new development model had little effect on the sequence of events. For instance, in 2007, the position of the Ministry of Interior was clear: “(Moroccans of the World) should not hope to cast their votes, in 2007, to elect their representatives in Parliament, following the 2007 Parliamentary elections.” The National Council of Moroccans in France denounced this position, as it went against royal directives, and criticized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior for “failing to implement real initiatives to effectively allow for the true participation of Moroccans living abroad in the 2007 elections.”⁸ The Justice and Development Party sounded the same alarm and saw this situation as obstructing the will of Moroccans abroad for what it considered fears of a pro-Islamist wave in the elections. Later in 2011, during the early elections, the proposal was for Moroccans living abroad to vote by proxy, which means that a Moroccan living in Morocco would vote on behalf of one Moroccan living abroad. This formula was criticized by the JDP Secretary-General, even by the opposition, as an “insult.”⁹

How can one interpret this inability – or lack of will – to implement a system of political participation for the Moroccan diaspora? According to the mandate of its first term,¹⁰ the CCME published its report on political and civic participation in 2013. Although it was not explicitly “disseminated to the public,” the report presented all the components which diluted the significance of such participation, which some argued would be quasi-impossible. At first, the legitimacy of diaspora representation to promulgate public policies regarding Morocco was questioned. The migration strategy was seen primarily as a decision led by individuals as part of their search for personal change and growth and was not negotiated with the country of origin. It is not a debt towards the country of origin. There was also the question of dual allegiance to two countries which, according to the report, clouds the nature of strategies and policies of the diaspora. These are sometimes contradictory and can cause a conflict of interests. Finally, the report discussed the lack of an automatic link between a community abroad and the obligation of being represented in the country of origin.¹¹



In conclusion, the report on the new development model added nothing new on the issue of different modes of participation, beyond collating all the decisions, recommendations, and directions listed in strategic reports, royal speeches, and constitutional provisions. Despite clear growing interest in the government's mobilizing the Moroccan diaspora, some fundamental issues regarding representation and its institutional implementation remain unresolved.

The legitimacy of representation: A question with no answer

The measures and processes for engaging the Moroccan diaspora in the country's development are plagued with several problems, including institutional instability and the lack of governance of migration policies. The ministerial department in charge of migration and its structure has remained changed ever since it was moved from the Ministry of Labour. It was part of the remit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then came under the mandate of the Prime Minister before going back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the last governmental reshuffle. Moreover, the CCME has yet to renew its members, who were appointed in 2006 for a four-year mandate and whose functions are de facto over. On the other hand, the Hassan II Foundation focuses on the social and cultural dimensions by providing literary and artistic assistance and mentorship. Its Board of Directors has not convened since 2020 and its structures have not been renewed.

In summary, participation remains seasonal, visible only during strategic debates but with no meaningful influence on the implementation and evaluation of public policy in Morocco or the host country. Indeed, political participation is the weakest link in the diaspora mobilization. It has witnessed a series of ups and downs but was never fully resolved. While all these developments towards effective participation are interesting, they are still inadequate. They require a true will to act, including on behalf of political parties. In fact, not all parties agree on the institutional configuration or how to interpret the principle of participation. In their 2021 electoral platforms, all parties paid lip service to the constitutional principle but failed to raise any real suggestions on how to implement them.



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In addition, assessing the participation of Moroccans of the World in terms of process, outcomes, and impact should be based on the analysis conducted. Thus, divergent opinions and positions will systematically emerge between those who are aligned with the enforced participation mechanisms and those who are not.

At the heart of this divergence lies the issue of legitimacy of representation which usually results from appointments or nominations through administrative bodies or other appointed actors. In other words, there is no democratic formula for selecting members in the institutions or participants in consultations. The use of associative structures or networks to identify participants from the diaspora does not adhere to clear and transparent mechanisms.

Coupled with these two issues is the perception of the Moroccan diaspora based on its experience and the weight it gives to solving the problems in the homeland and host communities. This perception raises, de facto, the question of identifying the public policies that should be influenced and their geographical boundaries and becomes more important for Moroccans with dual citizenship, which infers that a dual allegiance is not always compatible with the right to political participation.

Even if Moroccans abroad have a lot of expectations and their participation is not controversial in principle, the fact is that their mode of participation does not require unanimity. Therefore, given the mobilization of Moroccans of the World as agents of change, the commission in charge of the new development model “reiterates ... the importance of implementing constitutional provisions for a better representation of our diaspora, especially by bolstering the CCME.”

This recommendation makes sense, provided that the issue of the representation model is resolved within the CCME. During its first term, the Council was tasked with consulting on this issue. However, the best middle ground between direct representation in Parliament or other electoral structures and the CCME appointments, is to consider the council as the diaspora’s Parliament where members are elected. This idea was already on the table but it now needs to be translated into action. It will contribute to reinforcing democracy and transparency, as well as identifying the areas of intervention of the diaspora representatives while tackling public policies that directly affect them, especially



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through foreign policies and cooperation. Finally, such a process would improve migration governance by holding the concerned departments accountable before the representatives of Moroccans of the World.



Endnotes

1. According to the Court of Accounts, Moroccans living abroad who are registered in the diplomatic missions or consulates amount to 4.2 million people. Other estimates indicate that this figure reaches 5 or 6 million people, over 15% of the total Moroccan population. See: <http://www.courdescomptes.ma/upload/ftp/documents/28.%20Ofre%20culturelle.pdf>
2. For a better understanding of this change, see “Study on the Contribution of Moroccans Residing Abroad to Morocco’s Development”:
https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/docs/morocco/Etude_contribution_MRE_au_developpement_du_Maroc.pdf
3. Malika Gouirir, “State, Politics, and Absence: the “status” of Moroccans Living Abroad (MRE)”, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 144 | 2018, 81-98. See: <http://journals.openedition.org/remmm/11829>
4. See the collection of documents prepared for this consultation that aimed at identifying the real needs and realistic possibilities for MDM political and civic participation: <https://www.ccme.org.ma/fr/activites/8423>
5. The aforementioned context took on a new dimension on migration management with the adoption of the 2014 National Immigration and Asylum Strategy. This direction addresses Morocco’s triple status as a country of origin, transit, and destination. See: <https://marocainsdumonde.gov.ma/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Strate%CC%81gie-Nationale-dimmigration-et-dAsile-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf>
6. See: <https://lematin.ma/express/2019/35-membres-commission-speciale-mode-developpement/327969.html>
7. Between 1984 and 1993, the Moroccans living abroad were represented in the Parliament. See also Ghislaine El Abid, “The Moroccan Diaspora. From Citizen Participation to Citizenship”, *Afrique contemporaine Journal*, 2015/4 (issue. 256), p. 110-113. DOI: 10.3917/afco.256.0110. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-afrique-contemporaine-2015-4-page-110.htm>
8. Mokhtar FERDAOUSI. See: <https://www.yabiladi.com/article-politique-945.html>
9. During the 2016 Parliamentary elections, the same Islamist party that had led the government majority during the Arab Spring protests accepted the vote by proxy option.
10. It should be noted that during its first 4-year term, the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad was given royal directives to consult on the modes of MD political participation and the process of joining the Council in the future.
11. In a review of the report, Abdelkrim Belguendouz, a subject matter expert, made a series of commentaries criticizing several matters, including methodological limits of the comparative analysis made, the sample of countries chosen, and the hand-picked aspects of the analysis to justify the lack of participation, lack of engagement of all the concerned parties, and even the lack of consideration for the stance of the CCME’s Working Group on Political Participation and Citizenship. See: https://issuu.com/wakeupmre/docs/belguendouz_reponse_au_livre_du_ccm



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About the author

Anas El Hasnaoui

Anas El Hasnaoui is an expert in development efficiency issues. After a career in investment promotion, he was the Chargé de mission at the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME) and later became the Head of the Economic Promotion Department at Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad. He was a member of the research team on “[Moroccan Skills Abroad: 25 Years of Mobilization Policies.](#)”

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