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Can the Center Hold? Finding Decentralization in Moroccan Migration

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ABSTRACT:

Since independence, the Moroccan government has pursued a slow, controlled process of decentralization. While recognizing the benefits of local authority, the government does not wish to empower sub-national groups against the central monarchy or diminish its own relevance as the symbolic and administrative face of the nation. Subsequently, in many regions, local and community structures have only experienced limited access to political management. Furthermore, local administrations that rely on the central government for capital are directly subject to the wishes of the state. In regions where heavy outflows of migration are present, though, decentralization moves at a faster pace, free from the restrictive leash of the central authority in Rabat. Through remittances, local economic growth, and the mobilization of sub-national populations, migrant-sending zones are granted the tools necessary to pursue their interests independently, filling in where the central government fails to act.

Introduction

The Moroccan monarchy walks an administrative tightrope. As the political, religious and cultural face of the nation—as both a tangible state institution and as an intangible, nationalist one—this hereditary cornerstone of governance recognizes the need to maintain its influence as *the* central authority in Morocco. At the same time, however, the monarchy acknowledges the economic and political benefits of decentralization—including better provision of public services and improved representation—and has subsequently tinkered with a controlled process of sub-national empowerment (Nellis 1983, 484). Overall, the crown seeks to bolster only the most basic governing bodies at the local level while sustaining its own relevance as an indispensible unifier of the Moroccan nation. Although the central government aims to be the sole

power behind the state's gentle devolution of authority, another unexpected driving force has emerged: migration.

Amidst the dramatic mobilization of Moroccan citizens since the 1970s, the movement of people, resources and capital has guided decentralization at a different rate and in a different direction than the planned redistribution of authority established by the state. Through remittances and ideas brought back from abroad, migrants promote both economic and community development within their respective regions. As a result, subnational bodies become more administratively and politically independent from the central government, ultimately taking the process of decentralization into their own hands.

This de facto transfer of authority does not present itself clearly and obviously through legislation or separatism, and one cannot simply interview the relevant populations and expect to reveal a codified diffusion of power from central to regional actors. Rather, the effects that migrants have on decentralization are manifest in the subtle and gradual development of self-sufficiency and self-determination at the local level. Sub-national empowerment appears, as McMurray describes, in the "myriad of local, spontaneous, uncoordinated, opportunistic attempts" by a population to exhibit control over matters of governance, poverty, infrastructure, and society (McMurray in Parnell and Kane 2003, 137). The final product, though, is plainly visible. Areas of high out-migration *bestow upon themselves* the tools necessary for development, without suffering from financial or political leashes tied to the monarchy.

The following investigation of migration's role as a catalyst for decentralization will begin with a necessary review of the history of centralized rule in Morocco and the

government's later approach towards moderate devolution, followed by an outline of migration's contemporary impact on local economic growth in the country. Combining considerations from these overviews of Moroccan governance and economics, we will move on to study how local administration has developed in regions experiencing heavy levels of emigration. Finally, the resulting emergence of sub-national, development-focused citizenry will be considered, along with its potential effect on the local polity.

A Review of Political Authority in Morocco

Prior to the French and Spanish occupation of Morocco in the early twentieth-century, the central monarchy exhibited little control over rural tribes. This is especially evident in the case of Amazight groups located in the Moroccan Souss, where traditional *jama'at*—local governing bodies—held significant communal authority and functioned without major interference from the sultanic head of state (Iskander 2005, 34–36). Later, during the period of French rule, colonial administrators sought to weaken sub-national groups and promote greater central authority, doing so in order to suppress any threats that may emerge from tribal factions (Hagopian 1967, 203). From a colonial standpoint, their fears were justified—sub-national uprisings during the Rif War of 1921 – 1926 inflicted heavy damages on the Spanish in the north of the country, and the well organized coalition of Rifi fighters under Muhammad bin al-Karim al-Kattabi nearly succeeded in the creation of a Rif Republic free of foreign rule (Pennel 1982). The French military weakened local groups by claiming tribal lands and redrawing administrative areas. The French also set in place significant supervision over local affairs by pairing colonial civil servants with traditional intermediaries between tribal

leaders and the sultan (Hagopian 1967, 203). As well, the heavy concentration of policymaking decisions in the protectorate capital of Rabat led to the deterioration of local institutions, and the diminished influence of the *jama'at* (Lewis 1960, 49). Despite the supposed security benefits of heavily centralized authority, administrative problems associated with the lack of local governing structures quickly became visible—French efforts to engage in rural development projects and promote economic output were destined to failure without the presence of effective regional bodies (Hagopian 1967, 205).

Upon independence, the Moroccan government opted to align itself with the same emphasis on strong central authority, determining that unquestioned rule in the form of the monarchy was necessary to maintain stability and guarantee a unified nation following the country's liberation (Lewis 1960, 46). Post-colonial tensions between the former French territory and the relatively impoverished Rif region, and the potential for civil war amidst rebellions from the North, further justified policies that sought to disable tribal influence (McMurray in Parnell and Kane 2003, 129). The central government engaged in a detribalization effort, hoping to limit the leverage of traditional, sub-national actors by breaking up former jurisdictions into communes organized according to the economic and political interests of the state (Lewis 1960, 54). While basic tribal identities remained, the direct impact of tribal structures on administrative affairs was crippled amidst a governing environment of heavy centralized rule, just as it had been during the French protectorate era (Lewis 1960, 50). Nicos Poulantzas' description of the formation of state authority—wherein the central government legitimizes itself by monopolizing its territorial influence and eliminating the sub-national distinctions, thereby establishing a

"unified, homogenized nation"—fits well to the post-colonial Moroccan case (McMurray in Parnell and Kane 2003, 135). The monarchy solidified its central authority and diluted local powers by conducting itself as both a political and societal representation of the nation. The king's religious stature as the spiritual leader of an egalitarian Islamic state belittled petty sub-national distinctions that may provoke divisions within the population (Hagopian 1967, 206). The central government's assertion of its universal influence is perhaps most evident in the national slogan of Morocco, "God, Nation, King."

In order to placate any local concerns that may develop amidst the emboldened monarchy, the government in Rabat created democratically elected councils at the level of the communes, yet these were essentially political nonentities with no real administrative influence (Nellis 1983, 490). In his immediate post-independence description of the Rommani district in rural Morocco, William Lewis notes that the administrators who maintained the area's local Administrative Center in 1960 were not representative of the population they served; they were young, educated men with no real place in the local community, hailing instead from disparate urban centers (Lewis 1960, 45).

The thoroughly emphasized primacy of the monarchy in all affairs—both national and local—by no means assured the effectiveness of the central authority in administrative matters. With sub-national councils only acting as consultative bodies, void of regional unity and unable to enact any sort of development projects, the state's plans for economic advancement fell into disarray. Government investments aimed at short-term profits and had no positive impact on local growth, while impoverished conditions in rural areas stagnated (Hagopian 1967, 206-209). Administrative institutions

in Rabat were weighed down with wide-reaching responsibilities to identify, interpret,

and act upon the needs of disparate communities (Lewis 1960, 46). The monarchy's

"five-year plan" for the amelioration of agricultural conditions, enacted in 1960, relied on

expanded bureaucratic structures and ended as a failure—never confronting the central

issues including land tenure and use—thus illustrating the dire need for greater

functionality at the local level (Hagopian 1967, 208-209). Meager approaches to the

devolution of administrative powers continued through the 1960s, yet a genuine attempt

to achieve partial decentralization did not appear until the rise of a political incentive:

Morocco's annexation of the former Spanish Sahara in 1975.

The monarchy's efforts to integrate the Sahara into the national whole through the

promotion of regionalized authority expressed to the Sahrawi population—and to the rest

of Morocco's individual regions—the state's willingness to move towards a greater level

of sub-national autonomy (Nellis 1983, 486). The policy decision, while aligning with the

political urgency of the Saharan issue, existed as well as a distinct strategy for improved

governmental efficiency and decreased economic inequality between various regions

(Nellis 1983, 486-487). The state hoped that, in the end, the eased burden of central

administrative structures and the increased productivity at the sub-national level would

buttress authorities that cooperated with the central government while additionally

furthering the legitimacy of state powers in Rabat (Nellis 1983, 488). Still, one cannot

label Morocco's restructuring of administrative roles as a full-fledged pursuit of

decentralization. The approach is better characterized, as John Nellis describes, as a

system of *tutorial* decentralization, through which the state systematically awards or

deducts power according to whether localities comply with the demands and interests of

the monarchy. The process is also often more akin to deconcentration, where the government relinquishes only limited and retractable responsibilities to sub-national actors that "remain subject to the control or the supervision of the center" (Nellis 1983, 489).

In *Organisation communal et organization des finances des collectivites locales et de leur groupements*, a 1976 government publication by the Kingdom of Morocco, local councils are defined as bodies that oversee the budget, development plan, investments and proposed projects of the commune. Yet because the main role of the council is to simply manage proposals and directions stemming from an established national plan, all under the oversight of the government in Rabat, it cannot claim to be a true example of decentralized administration. More so, the Ministry of the Interior's heavy influence over the actions of local councils, in addition to its ability to shut down councils or declare their resolutions void, indicates that the checks of the central government hold far more weight than the balance supposedly provided by regional bodies (Nellis 1983, 492). In 1976, research revealed that local councils were also constrained by a basic lack of education amongst administrative members, with illiteracy affecting 42 percent of councilors (Nellis 1983, 494). Finally, councils in the 1970s were subject to full fiscal dependence on the central government for infrastructural funding and staff training, and, according to the World Bank, suffered from a high unlikelihood of attaining financial independence in the short- or medium-term (Nellis 1983, 502-503).

Within this early administrative environment of local impotence, the monarchy was able to maintain full control over the minimal expansion of political authority. In a "tutorial" fashion, the central government would slowly grant responsibilities and limited

resources to these incapacitated governing structures, incrementally building up regional

bodies as they complied with the policy guidelines decided upon in Rabat. In 1975, King

Hassan II openly acknowledged his government's timid approach to the devolution of

power, stating that it trained local administrations to remain conscious of "the true

priorities and needs…of the population" (Nellis 1983, 484). Yet in this scenario, it is

much more accurate to argue that sub-national units are forced to stay in tune with the

true priorities of the monarchy. By 1981 almost no decentralizing progress had been

made, and the government was still forced to acknowledge "the excessive

centralization…[of its] administrative apparatus," which produced defects such as

"slowness of administrative management, great distances between decision centers and

information sources, congestion of central services, and an irrational utilization of human

resources" (*Projet de plan de development economique et social*, qtd. in Nellis 1983,

485).

Although the monarchy's policy of minimal, gradual decentralization was

intended to mitigate the overloaded administrative platter of the central government and

improve the provision of infrastructure and services—eventually leading to greater

national productivity and reduced poverty levels—the approach failed to achieve high

levels of economic development.

Migration, Where Development Grows

Throughout the early period of independence and into the 1970s, Beni Mellal and

its surrounding region—and similarly isolated rural areas—had become uncomfortably

familiar with the central government's failure to provide a framework for development

outside of Morocco's main urban centers. As one lifelong resident of the city explained,

Beni Mellal had been trapped in what seemed to be inescapable poverty, struggling with

little to no government assistance (Interview with Mr. Elmostafa Abou Elkhair, 22

November 2010). At that time, similar conditions were present in other rural regions of

Morocco, such as in the Moroccan Souss, where government neglect and poor

development policy produced what Natasha Iskander describes as "some of the worst

human development indicators in the Arab world" (Iskander 2005, 4-5, 15). Between

1975 and 2000, however, these egregious levels of underdevelopment were turned

around, not by the hand of the government but instead by the economic impact of

migration.

Hein de Haas identifies three main regions of Moroccan out-migration: "The

eastern part of the Rif mountain area, the southwestern Souss region near Agadir and the

river oases located southeast of the High Atlas." In communities throughout these three

areas, increasing levels of migration correlate with better infrastructure, high rates of

economic development, and improved social conditions (de Haas 2007, 4, 14). But how

can broad, collective benefit emerge from remittances, which largely go towards private

investments like real estate, small businesses, and household consumption? How can

conditions improve in places where workers have chosen to flee rather than to stay and

fix their community's lasting problems (Jacquement 1996, 379)? Indeed, many migration

pessimists will argue that remittances lead to the deterioration, rather than the

empowerment, of the communities left behind. But we must keep in mind that the ways

in which migrants invest produce income-multiplier effects, often resulting in benefits to

non-migrant households (de Haas 2007, 6-7). Migrants often direct money earned abroad

towards agricultural development, housing construction, and non-agricultural enterprises (de Haas 2007, 13-14). The pursuit of agricultural development includes the construction of wells, water pumps and irrigation systems, all of which contributed to the lessened impact of drought occurring during the 1970s (de Haas 2007, 18), addressing an essential issue where government action had not been present. Real estate development occurs in regions left behind by migrants, building up urban centers, subsequently consolidating economic activity and spurring indirect job development within energized economic zones (de Haas 2007, 17). As remittances strengthen city-centers, growth is compounded by an influx of domestic migrants seeking job opportunities in the new economic hub paired with more remittances that gravitate towards the new provision of public services (de Haas 2007, 24-26).

It is certain that migration has had a substantial impact on the instigation of economic activity in once sedentary, rural regions. Localities formerly confined to poverty and excluded from the "Maroc utile" now enjoy economic growth and financial activity. How that translates into revived local administration, though, and transforms the sub-national polity, is not as simple of a story.

Migration and the Mobilization of Interests

In urban centers subject to remittance-based growth and high levels of out-migration, one can identify the gradual formation of development networks that interlink migrants' private investments, the needs and interests of the local community, and the financial and intellectual resources needed to independently pursue community projects. Hein de Haas describes that migrants' personal attachments to sending communities are

especially evident in such emerging development movements, wherein resources are gathered in order to establish public infrastructure, social projects, and economic proposals (de Haas 2007, 11). Through such initiatives we can identify the informal creation of administration around a communal philosophy of development, reached through a discussion on targets or necessities neglected by the official governing structure (Lewis 1960, 45).

Such developments were plainly presented on 18 November 2010, during a meeting of locals from the region of Fkih Ben Saleh, hosted by a regional development organization, Carrefour de Developpement (CARDEV).[1] The organization seeks to mobilize civil society towards the achievement of human development and poverty reduction, as well as promote regional development and human rights while establishing an understanding of the living situation in Fkih Ben Saleh and the surrounding area (ascertained from CARDEV Informational Packet). The meeting, moderated by the organization's president, Mr. Brahim Dahbani, provided an open forum for migrants and non-migrants alike to discuss the needs of the community and the direction of investments and remittances from abroad in local projects. Specifically, the organization members discussed the construction of a local youth recreation center, aimed at helping to foster the retention of youths within the local community. Some migrants in attendance represented specific remittance-sending groups from abroad, and their interaction with the non-migrants expressed, to an extent, the greater economic, political and cultural dialogue taking place between Moroccan communities in both sending and receiving countries. The livelihood of the debate, and the organization members' obvious devotion

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[1] The meeting was attended by the author. It was conducted in Darija, and an overview of the subject matter was provided to the author afterwards in French. An interview was then conducted with Mr. Brahim Dahbani, president of CARDEV.

to the growth and improvement of their home, was boldly on display. The passion exhibited by the migrants seemed to have carried over easily to the non-migrants in the room, and although societal tensions had sharply divided migrants and non-migrants in the past, there appeared to be no obvious rifts within the open forum. The CARDEV organization functions without significant government funding and is independently pursuing financial relationships with both foreign and domestic partners in order to achieve its goals. Following the meeting, Mr. Dahbani noted that before migrants began to leave in such great numbers, no such system of community action was in place or even possible. Commenting on the projects pursued by CARDEV and the forum it provides, Dr. Abderrahim Anbi, Professor at the Universite Ibn Zahr in Agadir, points out that migrants return to Morocco with a different conception of their own political authority—a notion of power that goes beyond simple party affiliation, which is evident during the discussion at the CARDEV meeting (Interview with Dr. Abderrahim Anbi, 18 November 2010). Returned migrants independently reposition themselves within the political hierarchy they return to, ultimately changing the authoritative structure.

One can cite a similar example of migrant mobilization for community development from the Moroccan Souss in the 1990s—a far-reaching project that illustrated a migrant-driven transformation of the region's political, economic and infrastructural landscape (Iskandar 2005, 5). A group of returned migrants from France, equipped with capital to pursue regional investments of their choosing, determined to spur community development by improving local access to electricity, a service wherein public need was the greatest (Iskandar 2005, 24-25). Prior to the efforts of the migrants in the Souss region, the Moroccan government had failed to adequately address the area's

incompetent electricity network, despite the fact that rural access lagged substantially behind other developing states in the region, including Algeria and Tunisia (Iskandar 2005, 26). The project proceeded with the assistance of foreign organizations, enlisted the aid of local non-migrants, and relied heavily "local assets…local materials, local knowledge, [and] local forms of social organization" in order to tailor the infrastructural undertaking to the region's specific character and needs (Iskandar 2005, 27). The end product—which did not adhere to the standards and protocol for construction established by the Moroccan National Office of Electricity, but better suited the needs of the community none the less—was managed by a locally staffed administration assigned to maintain the new network and facilitate the discussion and pursuit of further development projects (Iskandar 2005, 31-32). Following the success of the efforts, similar village associations were formed throughout the rest of the Souss valley, providing electricity in addition to other locally identified services (Iskandar 2005, 39).

Both the CARDEV development forum and the Souss Valley electricity project illustrate how sub-national communities draw upon migrants' resources and local mobilization in order to administer regional development in sectors where the central government lags behind. While the restrained, pre-migration localities described earlier were unable to engage in independent projects due to the central authority's control of financial resources, communities in the Souss and in Fkih Ben Saleh exploited monetary, social, political, knowledge, and network-based resources carried by returned migrants, thereafter setting in motion a process of local transformation (Iskandar 2005, 8). The migrant groups, in return, by responding to the expression of regional demands and developmental gaps, establish a socio-political dialogue that is more responsive and

productive than the one originally dominated by the centrally focused interests of the

state. Throughout the Souss, collaboration between migrant resources and local directive

has assisted in the formation of cooperatives between agricultural communities and

migrant investors, boosting exports and establishing the region as an actor in the global

economy (Iskandar 2005, 6). Although John Nellis declared that the success of

decentralization depends on the *government's* creation of local infrastructures of

personnel and expertise (Nellis 1983, 506), local communities have directly engaged with

foreign resources and circumvented the apparent need to rely on the central authority for

the amelioration of sub-national conditions. Direct partnerships between sub-national

groups and foreign entities—for example, the local organization *Migrations et*

Developpement's partnership with France's Agence de l'Environment et de la Maitrise

d'Energie to lay the groundwork for an energy grid in the Souss Valley (Iskandar 2005,

28)—even raises the statues of localities to a level of trans-nationality, almost

undermining the authority of the state. One can also cite examples in the emigration hubs

of Khoribga and Chefchaouin, where foreign government agencies from migrant-

receiving countries—in these cases, Italy and Spain, respectively—have actually

partnered with localized development projects to quell the flow of labor into Europe.

        In addition to spurring the creation of concentrated urban facilities and

development networks in formally isolated population centers, migration allows for

societal transformation that challenges the dominance of traditional, crippling local

hierarchies. While in some cases this means the breakdown of communal authoritarian

structures that once handled local disputes and land management, it also indicates the rise

of new regional organization that permits the mobility of subaltern communities (de Haas

2007, 27-28). Strengthened local frameworks for development yield the democratization of community institutions and conditions for widespread engagement by all citizens in public affairs (Nellis 1960, 488). Consequently, regions of out-migration develop more level playing fields from which all community members can convey disparate needs, producing a more egalitarian regional configuration than the one administered by the central monarchy. Administrative processes and responsiveness, as well, are accelerated (Interview with Mr. Elmostafa Abou Elkhair, 22 November 2010). Overall, migration thus acts as an active element within an array of social, cultural and economic transformation taking place at the sub-national level (de Haas 2007, 32). Just as the decentralizing resources used by migrant-sending communities are not restricted to financial capital, but also incorporate the transfer of political influence, cultural values, social networks and intellect (Iskander 2005, 4), the impact of politically and developmentally activated local groups reaches beyond basic economics, altering the overall nature of the region in its relation to the central government and opening "interpretive spaces through which [localities] coalesced and articulated scattered needs, spoke previously unimagined ideas, made conceptual leaps and connections, and explored different technological solutions to make their ideas manifest (Iskander 2005, 50).

Changing Faces of the Local Polity and Considering Decentralization Theory

In a way, the array of changes taking place within migration-sending regions evokes Martin McGuire's classic theoretical conception of decentralized authority, wherein individuals are seen as "voting with their feet." As migrants part from their

homes in Morocco, seeking better income, better public services and the hope for or the

opportunity to earn a better life elsewhere, they cast a vote of no confidence in the

deteriorating, centrally-managed areas that they leave behind. The Moroccan state has

therein failed to effectively address problems at the local level, has not been adequate in

the provision of representative bodies for various needs, and has been unable to ensure to

its subjects economic stability (Hagopian 1967, 201). Later on, as migrants move back to

their original communities and invest in real estate and private enterprise, positioning

themselves amongst zones of urban growth, these returnees place their trust not in the

capabilities of the state, but rather in the societal and economic foundations through

which they hope to re-assimilate. When migrants and community members increase their

holdings in growing, semi-urban enclaves, they have a greater desire for exclusionary

access to services and comforts within their immediate district and benefit from effective,

localized administration (Ellickson 1972, 3, 21). And as domestic migrants also flock to

these new centers of growth—places like Beni Mellal and Fkih Ben Saleh—searching for

work, they too aggregate more legitimacy to the empowered local body, further

detracting from the influence of the centrally-strong but administratively-week state.

Does this gradual movement towards metropolitan government produce what

Robert Wood labels as "a better brand of politics" (qtd. in Ellickson 2003, 1)?

Remittance-funded regions seem to permit individuals "with similar tastes and

endowments to cluster into relatively homogenous jurisdictions where public services are

more closely tailored to individual preferences" (Ellickson 2003, 2). Wood's description

of a "spirit of fraternity" defining the political nature within fragmented local

governments, as opposed to "grassroots democracy," perhaps most cleanly applies to the

case of sub-national post-migratory mobilization, since administrative and developmental efforts are more tied to informal desires to improve the local conditions than to partisan interests (Ellickson 2003, 21-22).

As noted, it is impossible to associate the impact of migration of decentralization with any sort of de jure form of political devolution. One cannot, as James Katorobo suggests, "specify the primary unit of decentralization" towards which the diffusion of authority focuses itself (Katorobo 2004, 6). Efforts are instead needed to identify the non-state channels through which migrants and migrant-sending communities pursue development projects, and how informal associations of mobile and stagnant communities seek to instigate change where the central government has been inactive. Nonetheless, even at this early point in research, one thing is clear: Migrant communities have acted as a catalyst for the organization, funding, and execution of locally-focused development projects throughout semi-urban centers in Morocco, and the central government has yet to play an equally active part.

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