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Strengthening co-operation with the Maghreb countries

Addendum to the report

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

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1. Political presentation

1. The parliamentary elections on 7 September 2007 in Morocco were won by the independence party, Istiqlal, and its president, Abbas El Fassi, was appointed prime minister on 19 September 2007. Istiqlal won 52 seats, out-distancing the PJD (Justice and Development Party), an Islamic party (46 seats), the MP (Popular Movement) (41 seats), the RNI (National Rally of Independents) (39 seats), the USFP (Socialist Union of Popular Forces) (38 seats) and – the major loser in the elections – the UC (Constitutional Union) (27 seats).

2. Abbas El Fassi heads a coalition government made up of Istiqlal, the RNI, the USFP and the PPS (Progress and Socialism Party) and of technocrats. Outside the coalition is, in particular, the MP, despite its coming third. The 34 members of the new government include seven women ministers or state secretaries in key posts (energy and mines, health, culture, family and solidarity, youth and sport, school education, foreign affairs).

3. Power alternation between parties, which began in February 1998 with the appointment of the socialist Abderrahman el Yousoufi as prime minister and head of government until 2002, seems to have come of age in 2007 with the appointment of the leader of the majority Istiqlal Party, Mr El Fassi, as prime minister and the Islamic Party's inclusion in the constitutional system. This alternation is deliberate and consensual. However, it is the King who makes the appointments to the key, supposedly sovereign ministries, including justice, internal affairs, Islamic affairs and foreign affairs, with Mr Fassi-Fihri as minister for foreign affairs.

4. The RNI presides over the two parliamentary chambers. The House of Representatives, which is the lower chamber, has 325 members and the Speaker is Mr Mustapha Mansouri. The Chamber of Advisers, created in 1996, is made up of 270 members elected by indirect suffrage by elected members of trade chambers, employees' associations and local authorities. Members serve for a nine-year term, with a third of the membership being renewed every three years. The Speaker is Mr Mustapha Oukacha.

5. The elections were nonetheless notable for an unprecedented abstention figure (63%). With only 37% turnout, the proportion of blank votes came to 19%. These figures cannot fail to raise questions. Observers found the ballot to have been honest and transparent. That was not the view of the PJD (Justice and Development Party), which levelled accusations of corruption: although it had come first in terms of votes received (just under 500 000), it came only second in terms of seats (under the system of proportional voting, by constituency). The young are not attracted by elections. The word "politics" still creates fear. It puts people in mind of the former regime and the legacy of Hassan II. But the results concerning the Islamists came as no surprise according to many senior figures in Morocco who had not anticipated any massive or majority-winning breakthrough for them. The electoral system and the constituency map are shaped to prevent major electoral change in the rural areas, where the PJD is strong. The real power in fact lies with the royal palace. The monarchy, in Morocco, is undeniably popular and the King would seem set on reforming his kingdom.



2. Reforms

6. With Mohammed VI as the driving force, Morocco has embarked on political reforms: openness to democratic change, reform of the family code and decentralisation.

7. Issues of democracy and human rights are taken very seriously in Morocco. Aware that respect for these things promotes development, the kingdom has made fairness and truth its watchwords in putting the “Years of the Lead” behind it once and for all. For example, the IER (Equity and Reconciliation Body), a truth commission set up in April 2004 to shed light on crimes committed during the reign of Hassan II, has achieved the release, rehabilitation and compensation of nearly 12 000 prisoners. The compensation rate runs at nearly 95% and victims are given medical cover. An all-out effort, including DNA testing, is being made to investigate the 1 200 known cases of disappearances. Only 10 or so cases remain unidentified.

8. As Morocco opens a new chapter in its history, reconciliation is thus being used as a tool of social cohesion policy. The kingdom has embarked on large new projects such as guarantees of fair, pluralist elections, a Citizen’s Charter and a Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad.

9. Changes are already observable with regard to infringements of human rights. Police officers responsible for the various proven cases of torture have been punished. Although it reaches only a tiny proportion of the population (1% – equivalent to 300 000 or so readers), the press is now free even though criticism of the King is not allowed.

10. Women’s place in society has evolved in the direction of greater gender equality, as can be seen from the Code of Personal Status, which underwent a spectacular reform (the *Moudawana*) in 2004, and the recent introduction of a charter on women’s portrayal in the media. Morocco is the second country in the Arab world (Tunisia was the first) to adopt measures on behalf of women.

11. Faced with the problems of fundamentalism and terrorism, Morocco has developed a specific approach. Mohammed VI, as a modernising sovereign, has opted for an open Islam and a reassurance strategy, with the emphasis on integrating moderate Islamists into the constitutional process and development of human rights and the economy. Islam exists as a political force but the King, as Commander of the Faithful, acts as the protector of the Moroccan people, who are practising Muslims and conservative. This distinctively Moroccan approach is very pronounced and marks off the country from Algeria and Tunisia.

12. Terrorist action inspired by al-Qaeda remains localised and the country relatively protected from it. Terrorism is, in part, the consequence of an economy carrying high unemployment. The responses to a situation of that kind are smuggling, emigration and adherence to violent protest. The solution is policies geared to job creation and training for the younger generation.

3. Progress to be made

13. Morocco still carries a number of handicaps, in particular illiteracy and emigration, which hinder its economic and social development

14. Illiteracy remains high, with over 40% of the Moroccan population over the age of 15 – one person in three – unable to read or write. That is one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. Morocco must combat that deficiency, which places a real brake on economic development and building a democratic, modern society.

15. Graduates of Maghrebi universities go to the United States, Canada or Australia, while 85% of emigrants lacking higher education make for the European Union. Legal migration everywhere comes up against numerous obstacles, and this increases clandestine migration.

16. To put an end to these difficult situations which deprive the kingdom of its intellectual elites and prevent the poorest social strata from finding the solutions they seek to their problems, Mohammed VI has set up the INDH (National Initiative for Human Development), a major social-policy move to combat all forms of poverty and provide a comprehensive answer to all the problems which beset Morocco’s economic development.

4. Foreign policy

17. Morocco’s foreign policy continues to focus on two priorities: Morocco’s claim to the Western Sahara and its ties with the European Union (combined with close attention to its relations with the United States). Stability of the Maghreb and regional integration are absolutely necessary.

18. While taking the view that the regional status quo is bad for all the players, Morocco remains convinced that democracy and economic and social development of the Maghreb as a whole are the keys to regional stability and the region's political integration. That is the course charted by the UMA (the Union of the Arab Maghreb), a political body created by the Treaty of Marrakesh on 17 February 1989 and composed of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Mauritania, and its Tunisian secretary general, Mr Ben Yahia, who see economic relations – currently underexploited – as the best means of achieving regional integration. However, the difficult relations between Algeria and Morocco, whose border remains closed, are an impediment to take-off of the regional economy.

19. The Maghreb – the three countries of the central Maghreb plus Mauritania and Libya, forming the Greater Maghreb – is a fairly homogeneous entity historically, linguistically and as regards religion, while retaining distinctive features peculiar to the individual country. Though disappointed by early European initiatives (the Barcelona Process, Euromed and the 1995 MEDA programme), Morocco has subsequently strongly engaged with the EU (through the March 2000 Association Agreement and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy action plan) and has openly expressed its desire for closer relations with Europe.

20. Currently, Moroccan leaders are showing a keen interest in co-operation with the Council of Europe and this could develop into a partnership for democracy. However, Morocco first and foremost wants this co-operation to yield concrete projects on democracy and human rights, intercultural and interfaith dialogue, and human development and good governance.

21. The Western Sahara is basically seen as the final episode in decolonisation. Since Morocco's 1975 annexation of the former Spanish colony and the 1981 Organisation of African Unity Summit in Nairobi on Self-Determination, which set up an implementing committee on the Western Sahara referendum, Moroccan positions have evolved while still placing the emphasis on Moroccan territorial integrity. Morocco has consistently been in favour of self-determination, entailing, with each succeeding UN peace or settlement plan (1988, 1991, the 1997 Baker Plan), an ever larger measure of self-government. Rightly taking the view that a mini-state on Morocco's southern border would turn into a sanctuary for terrorism and organised crime and would destabilise the whole of the Maghreb and that dividing up the territory would split people and tribes, Morocco is nevertheless in favour of extensive autonomy. Its position is supported by France, Spain and the United States.

22. Morocco, under United Nations auspices, is continuing its discussions with the Polisario Front towards settlement of a conflict which has now been going on for over thirty years. In Resolution 1754 (April 2007) the United Nations urged upon both sides "a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara". Further talks were held in January 2008, but without any great result. They did, however, lay the foundations of a thematic approach to the issues ahead of a further meeting scheduled for March 2008. Morocco also considers that Europe has a contribution to make, providing assistance to democratisation and social and economic development of the region.

23. However, Polisario seems internally divided. There are those who object to Algerian interference in the destiny of the Saharan people, denounce the situation in the camps and call for an extraordinary congress attended by reputable international observers. There is comment in the Moroccan press that the Tifariti Congress got nowhere, resulting neither in war nor autonomy and producing only deadlock.

24. As for the "Mediterranean Union", it will have to be built on recognised regional entities such as the Maghreb and on concrete projects. The challenges, the interests at stake and the solidarity are all very real.

25. Morocco maintains regular political dialogue with the United States, with which it has a free trade agreement which came into force on 1 January 2006. The United States classes Morocco as a major non-NATO ally. Rabat hosted the first Forum for the Future, part of the American Broader Middle-East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative, and receives development support from the American Millennium Challenge Account. And China, too, occupies an important position in Morocco's trade relations, as can be seen from the agreements signed during the April 2006 visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao.