

Noura the Explorer

Including Children in Morocco's Democratic Process

PIPS White Paper 9.5: *Executive Summary*

Haley Larson, Research Fellow

Jack Shangraw, Research Intern

Top-down reform has failed to spur democratic change in Morocco. Both Moroccans and outsiders fear future violent protests if demands for democratic reform go unaddressed. For change to be bottom-up, reform must take place at the base of society: children. To educate children on elements of democracy, this policy paper suggests a cartoon series, developed by Moroccan youth with assistance from U.S. non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that highlights the importance of civic participation on a micro-level, tailored to Moroccan culture.

An Illiberal Government Hiding Under Liberal Reform

U.S. leaders have deemed Morocco a “model” and “leader” of political reform in the Middle East, despite the persistence of absolutist rule. Although the monarchy responded to the uprisings in 2011 by passing a series of constitutional reforms, substantive change has not been achieved.

- *Unconstrained Constitutional Monarchy.* As of 2011, the king is now required to choose a prime minister from the party with the most votes in parliamentary elections. However, no one leader can possibly wield enough influence to sway the King from his platform due to a fragmented party system. The King also retains the power to dissolve parliament at any time and to modify any law by royal decree. As for the judiciary, the King still oversees the courts and can now appoint half of the magistrates.
- *Informal Barriers to Political Participation.* The *makhzen*, or “deep state,” refers to the monarch’s inner circle of unelected officials. The *makhzen* paid counter-protesters during the 2011 protests, and in 2013, they played an integral role in parliamentary coalition negotiations and cabinet appointments. Bribery is rampant in Morocco, and a large majority of Moroccans believe the state is corrupt. Despite continued imprisonment of political dissidents by King Mohammad, many Moroccans still recognize the monarch as “sacred” because of state-sponsored media and yearly celebrations that renew the people’s allegiance to the King.

Channeling Unrest While Expanding Opportunities

Breaking from tradition, President Trump's administration rhetoric does not prioritize spreading democracy. Nevertheless, NGOs should continue to encourage democracy abroad, as democracy promotion remains a key part of U.S. national identity. According to a 2016 United Nations report, violent protests in Morocco are looming, which highlights the need for peaceful political expression. NGOs can inspire nonviolent democratic change due to their apolitical nature and history of offering local solutions. Moreover, Morocco's relatively open civil society creates a positive environment for NGOs. As part of a long history of U.S.-Moroccan cooperation, the Kingdom has allowed for both U.S. and Moroccan groups focused on democratic development to be active in society. Additionally, Morocco's growing economic and political influence in Africa provides an opportunity for U.S. NGOs to expand their outreach in the region.

Democracy: A Matter of Evolution, Not Revolution

U.S. NGOs and USAID have encouraged strong political parties and a robust civil society in Morocco, but their efforts have overlooked the importance of children as civic participants. Most political socialization occurs during elementary age, and children develop political orientations by the first year of primary school. By appealing to younger children, a cartoon can effectively instill in children broad democratic values fundamental to developing participatory governance over time. To continue civic education efforts, this white paper recommends a children's cartoon that discusses and illustrates broad democratic values as envisioned by Moroccan society.

- *Target Audience.* The cartoon will focus on children under the age of 15, with the goal of appealing to both children and adults to establish an intergenerational dialogue.
- *Content Development.* Moroccan youth activists with firsthand knowledge of local problems should drive the creation of the show. Content will aim to generate critical thinking about broad democratic norms, such as tolerance, accountability, equality, and conflict resolution.
- *Dissemination of the Show.* U.S. NGOs will assist Moroccan NGOs in recruiting artists and providing technological support. NGOs can expand their audience through various forums of media such as comic books, coloring books, gaming apps, and puppet shows.

Children's television programs have been used effectively for child socialization and development. Research shows that children who watch *Sesame Street* are more aware of inclusivity and tolerance. The program's messaging has been adapted to promote peace in conflict-prone regions, such as Palestine and Israel, and has achieved positive results.

Conclusion

Electoral reforms are not enough to ensure long-term democracy—groups must relay the importance of democracy to a younger audience to harness and foster strong, positive beliefs in the face of oppression. Discontent is growing in Morocco and the larger Arab world, creating the possibility for another set of violent protests. Algeria, Jordan, and Tunisia present opportunities to export the cartoon regionally due to their potential for democratic reform and large youth populations. U.S.-based groups can assist Moroccans in a peaceful, non-intrusive, creative manner that allows Moroccans to take agency over their work and transmit democratic principles to the next generation of leaders. Without relying on parents or teachers, a television character can teach children how to seize the next opportunity for social change.