



Promenade along the Bouregreg river, Rabat, 2016.

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Globalized Authoritarianism and the New Moroccan City

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In two decades, Morocco's large cities experienced dramatic changes. In 2009, the weekly magazine *TelQuel* referred to a veritable "urban revolution" following the launch of several megaprojects in cities like Tangiers, Casablanca and the capital Rabat.¹ Exemplary flagship projects are Tanger Med, a deep-water port facility aspiring to become a nodal point for global maritime trade and a major hub of containerized transport; Casablanca Marina, a new skyscraper complex with offices and luxury residences redesigning the beachfront of the metropole between the Casa–Port train station and the magnificent Hassan II mosque; and the Bouregreg project, the largest urban renewal undertaking in the history of the country developing exclusive

real estate, shopping malls, marinas and state-of-the-art cultural facilities along the estuary between Rabat and Salé. Together, these projects are radically transforming Morocco's cityscapes.

Compared to other countries in North Africa, Morocco is a trendsetter in megaprojects.² The regime envisions the country as connecting European capital networks with Africa, the Middle East and potentially Asia and the United States. The strategy of boosting the competitiveness of Morocco's metropolitan areas reflects the country's ambitions for global market integration. Under King Mohammed VI, urban megaprojects and large-scale infrastructural works came to characterize a shift toward "urban entrepreneurialism": the increasingly autonomous and entrepreneurial role of cities in the extraction and creation of surplus value within an increasingly competitive global market.

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Urban megaprojects, however, are only part of the story. From the beginning of his reign, Mohammed VI prioritized not only spectacular urban growth strategies involving land and property investment but also ambitious social development initiatives and poverty alleviation programs. A salient example is the Cities Without Slums (CWS) program launched in 2004. This nationwide slum eradication program offered a direct response to the urban crisis dramatically exposed by the suicide bombings in Casablanca in May 2003 that killed more than 40 people. All the suicide bombers came from Sidi Moumen, a slum area on the eastern periphery of Casablanca. The events strengthened the idea that the country's neglect of its urban poor created a breeding ground for domestic terrorism. The attacks also undercut the city's "unique selling proposition" and its image as a safe destination for investment.

These two kinds of urban projects bring to light the political practices that connect countries like Morocco to processes of globalization and illuminate how global capitalism is produced in cities such as Casablanca, Tangiers and Rabat. The transformation of the Moroccan city tells a broader story about the transformation of the state and the economy through neoliberal reform. Economic liberalization promised to undermine the power structures of authoritarian states, but in fact authoritarianism has persisted in new globalized forms.

A Shift in Ruling Power and Practice

Morocco's urban entrepreneurialism emerged not from an implementation of textbook reforms. Rather, the move was part of a longer-term and contingent process of profound societal and political change, one that has been continuously adjusted in response to new challenges and problems. The origins of Morocco's urban revolution date to the early 1980s. Like many countries in the Global South, Morocco faced a severe debt crisis and was forced to adopt a structural adjustment program pushed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1983.

These structural reforms posed some serious challenges to the ruling establishment. Privatization, market deregulation and fiscal discipline undermined the ability of state institutions to control both society and the economy. Austerity and structural adjustment had an immediate and devastating effect on poverty and social inequality, which contributed to numerous outbreaks of violence throughout the 1980s in the form of urban riots. These two factors threatened the position of the monarchy and its entourage. The gradual rethinking of the urban economy, in part through the launch of megaprojects and the implementation of new social programs, emerged in response to this new social and economic reality of structural adjustment and economic liberalization.³ In this context, the Moroccan city constitutes both a class project and a governmental problem. The goal is to generate economic growth and

maintain political order through new strategies and techniques of accumulation, domination and population management.

The ruling elites in Morocco adapted to the new reality but also participated in its construction. The state sold economic assets at bargain prices and adopted neoliberal policies, assuring the future of the Moroccan bourgeoisie.⁴ Morocco's elites who had occupied privileged positions in the state administration now made fortunes in the private sector. The royal family led by example. King Hassan II, for example, took control of Omnium Nord Africain—the largest private conglomerate in the country—from its French owners. The takeover signified an expansion of the monarchy's activities from the conventional state-institutional realm of the parliament and the ministries to the private realm of business and market control. Today, King Mohammed VI is the country's preeminent capitalist.

As neoliberal reforms created the conditions for new capitalist class relations alongside older neo-patrimonial and clientelist practices, the city became the privileged site for the elaboration of some of these new strategies. Neoliberal policies allowed the ruling elite to regain "in the private sector the influence that policies of economic liberalization were progressively eroding in government and the public sector."⁵ Massive investments in real estate and slum-upgrading projects opened new opportunities for a privatized housing sector and influential individuals like Anas Sefroui, CEO of Addoha, and Alami Lazraq, CEO of Alliances, two of Morocco's largest real estate companies. Neoliberal reforms also allowed the ruling elite to reinforce external political relationships, as the economic restructuring strengthened the position of foreign (particularly French) investors in the domestic market. The already strong relations between the French political elite and the monarchy allowed French multinationals like Bouygues and Alstom to acquire a dominant position in the Moroccan economy.

Urban projects in Morocco were profoundly shaped by the ways in which the interests of capital converged with security concerns and the problem of cities prone to riots. Cities were brought to the forefront in the construction of a new social order both as privileged spaces for capital accumulation and land commodification, as well as laboratories for the development of new modalities of government, social control and political domination.

Consequently, there is a political symbiosis between urban megaprojects and social initiatives such as Cities Without Slums. While the first are directly concerned with opening places to the global market, the second are concerned with the transformation of urban life itself—especially the lives of the urban poor who have a historical record of social protest and urban violence—and its adaptation to the new conditions brought forth by neoliberal globalization.

The City as a Class Project

In the Bouregreg river valley between Rabat and Salé lies a project that illustrates the tendency to prioritize the exchange



The Casablanca marina, 2017.

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value of the city (how to sell the city) over its use value (how to make the best possible city for its citizens). The valley is being transformed from a dumping ground and relatively degraded space into a modern urban center connecting two historic urban rivals: the bourgeois administrative capital and seat of the ruling class, and its neighbor depicted as plagued by urban poverty, informal housing and Islamist opposition. Launched in 2006, the Bouregreg project exploits the valley's strategic location and historic cultural resources such as the Hassan tower and the casbah of the Oudayas. The project encompasses a territory of 6,000 hectares alongside the Bouregreg riverbanks to be developed in six phases. The first two phases, relatively advanced, include the construction of luxury residences, hotels, marinas, commercial centers, an archeological museum and the Grand Theatre, designed by the late "starchitect" Zaha Hadid. The fluid sculptural form of the theatre, inspired by the movement of the river itself, is intended to serve as a new landmark for the city. The project also includes infrastructural works such as the new Moulay Hassan bridge, two tramlines, a tunnel underneath the

historic casbah and a new ring highway to improve mobility between the two cities.

The planning and design of a new urban dream world in the valley not only evidences the aesthetic transformation of Moroccan cities but also sheds light on changes in decision-making and state power. To realize this project, the state created the Agency for the Development of the Bouregreg Valley through Law 16-04. The Agency has exclusive authority over the project within its 6,000 hectare territorial boundaries, overseeing land previously under the jurisdiction of prefectures, local municipalities and the Rabat-Salé Urban Planning Agency. The Agency is authorized to develop zoning plans, organize public inquiries, provide public infrastructure, allocate land for construction, deliver construction permits, regulate all deeds of sale and expropriate private land deemed necessary for the project. All state-owned land was transferred to the Agency free of charge.

The Bouregreg Agency also operates as an intermediary between foreign investors and the Moroccan political scene. It attracts investors, such as the Abu Dhabi-based real estate

company Eagle Hills or the sovereign wealth fund Wessal Capital and gives them decision-making power. The Agency adopts plans, goals and strategies that best serve the interests of foreign investors. The original plan for the first phase of the Bouregreg project included the construction of a public space and green esplanade with palm trees in front of the medina of Salé where citizens could stroll and picnic. To increase private investor profit, however, that portion of the plan was eventually replaced with a gated community.

Urban planning and government thus become more accountable to investors and markets than to citizens. Long-term policy agendas have been deferred in favor of placating potential investors. Even if local authorities were to become more democratically accountable, democracy has been short-circuited by institutional arrangements like the Bouregreg Agency. Citizens have little capacity to influence the projects that are reshaping their own cities.

The creation of such an agency represents more than just a shift in state power from the national level to the city. The global elites involved in local politics do not so much weaken state authority as become active players within these new state agencies. In this sense, authoritarianism in Morocco was not undermined by economic liberalization; it was re-institutionalized and rescaled, with power shared with new global actors.

The manipulation of land and public resources through megaprojects like the Bouregreg development—not only in Morocco but in cities globally—has resulted in urban space being controlled with little public transparency. Social groups who would be otherwise welcome if these spaces were publicly owned and democratically controlled are finding themselves excluded. The luxury apartments, the higher prices for consumer goods, the guards outside the fences that surround the first phase of the Bouregreg project—situated next to the ancient medina of Salé and its primarily poorer residents—make clear that this new urban center is not meant for ordinary citizens. While the project may transform the Bouregreg valley into a globalized space, that space is not accessible or affordable to those who live in its immediate surroundings.

The Bouregreg project is not an isolated example. Moroccan authoritarianism has been transformed by the intertwining of the interests of ruling domestic elites and global economic actors. Whereas Hassan II ruled with an iron hand, Mohamed VI rules via holdings, funds and new state agencies. The result is not less authoritarianism, but rather authoritarianism with a different face: new institutions, new planning methods and new (global) relations of power.

The City as a Governmental Problem

Urban spectacles like the Bouregreg project do not take place in a social vacuum. Developers rarely have the opportunity to design cities from scratch. Already existing urban life, its

movement, its connections and its particular interests and desires can pose considerable problems and even threats from the viewpoint of those in power. Urban planning is thus largely a problem of government. Given international attention to human rights and democracy promotion, state repression of urban life can potentially compromise a country's desired global image.

Indeed, poverty and slums pose considerable challenges for urban class projects. In response to the disruptive moment of debt relief, structural adjustment and the coinciding riots in the early 1980s, Moroccan authorities reverted to repressive methods in the name of securitizing the urban territory. These methods, however, have proven ineffective in resolving the enduring economic crisis or consolidating the neoliberal transition. Authorities needed to integrate the so-called dangerous classes into the new neoliberal social order.

The Cities Without Slums program launched in 2004 stands as an example. In contrast to the more top-down methods of slum upgrading of the 1980s, the new program symbolized a shift from repression to integration. Inscribed into the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, CWS promoted principles such as participation, consent and economic empowerment through home ownership. Many national and international observers believed that the CWS program demonstrated the commitment of the monarchy to the ideals of social inclusion, good governance and participatory development.

The program targeted 362,000 households spread across more than 1,000 shantytowns (*bidonvilles*) in 85 cities and towns. The cost was estimated to be 25 billion Moroccan dirhams (\$2.62 billion), of which 10 billion was funded by the state via the Solidarity Fund for Housing. The state offered 3,500 hectares of public land to the project for sums far below market price. Authorities set up public-private partnerships and acted as guarantors for beneficiaries' debts with commercial banks. Some 80 percent of the slum-upgrading operations involved resettlement, often to the peripheries of the city. In addition to state support, CWS is also funded by international agencies such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the French Development Agency. USAID and other organizations provided expertise and technical assistance. In May 2018, 59 cities were declared slum-free,⁶ involving a total of 277,583 resettled households.⁷

Most observers consider the program to have failed to fulfill its social promises. Instead of reducing poverty, it merely relocated poverty to the urban peripheries. Nevertheless, the program was politically significant for other reasons. First, CWS symbolized a changing relationship between those who govern and the governed and among the governed themselves. The program furthered the replacement of the social contract of the post-colonial developmental state in which citizens garnered certain social privileges and rights (e.g., public employment) in exchange for their loyalty to the regime, with one that

promotes self-responsibility and encourages citizens to seize the opportunities of the free market. Through the fostering of home ownership, the facilitation of access to credit and the integration of informal housing into the formal market, CWS attempted to create a more self-reliant and entrepreneurial citizen. A new method of social engineering, called *accompagnement social*, has sought to gain the trust of slum dwellers by increasing their participation in the resettlement operation. Small teams on the ground organize information sessions, provide administrative and financial assistance and accompany the beneficiary through their move to a new location.

The program aims to achieve “sustained behavioral change.” According to a document by Al Omrane, the leading public operator behind CWS, “access to ownership allows slum dwellers to improve their living conditions and induces a *new social behavior*.”⁸ The goal is to transform the informal urban poor into consuming, taxpaying and indebted homeowners. According to program officials, once people are turned into indebted consumers, they will become responsible citizens with a proper job and a proper lifestyle.⁹ CWS illustrates how authorities require slum dwellers to participate in the making of a political world in which civic rights and social justice are circumscribed not only by the regime but also by the sanctions and incentives of the free market.¹⁰

The CWS program serves a second and related objective by giving authorities more bureaucratic control over a population perceived to be a threat. CWS enabled authorities to break up previously impenetrable urban neighborhoods characterized by the crisscross of shanties and unpaved narrow alleys. Slum dwellers were rehoused in new, more governable social housing blocs. According to a Moroccan Ministry of Housing manual, the added value of new rehousing practices developed by CWS was the “improvement of the quality of information [on the slum dwellers] available to the decision-makers.”¹¹

Finally, the CWS program also reconfigured the Moroccan economy by providing the regulatory framework and official support for the setup of public-private partnerships and the attraction of private investment in the housing sector. As such, it unlocked forms of capital previously inaccessible to the market, including both public property and the slum dwellers’ informal economic arrangements. Authorities intended poverty alleviation schemes in Morocco not only to prevent radicalization and enhance governmental control, but also to open new frontiers for profit and the exploitation of what Ananya Roy calls “poverty capital.”¹²

Toward a Globalized Authoritarianism?

Urban spectacles like the Bouregreg project and social initiatives like the CWS program were instrumental in burnishing the image of Moroccan exceptionalism characterized by good governance, social inclusion, participatory development

and authoritarian moderation. Particularly during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Morocco’s urban revolution sought to present a new Morocco led by Mohammed VI, a benevolent monarch with a clear economic vision and a caring heart for the disadvantaged. This image contrasted sharply with the authoritarian depiction of King Hassan II.

This narrative of a Moroccan exception, of course, has been challenged in recent years, given the crackdown on independent journalism and the ongoing repression of revolts in the Rif region and elsewhere.¹³ Yet, the critique of Moroccan exceptionalism focuses almost exclusively on the apparent resurfacing of repressive methods of political rule, while some of the very reforms that gave rise to the exceptionalist narrative remain unscrutinized. Rather than understanding Morocco as an authoritarian regime gradually incorporating liberal and social reforms that could form the basis for a genuine process of political liberalization,¹⁴ recent Moroccan urban reforms are part of a qualitative transformation of authoritarian rule toward a globalized authoritarianism better adapted to the reality of neoliberal global markets.

In the process, the Moroccan city is turning into an entrepreneurial city where decision-making processes are breaking loose from conventional political entities and poor urban life is being transformed and integrated into a new market-based ecosystem. Under pressure to democratize and respect human rights, political authority and decision-making power has been increasingly concentrated in exceptional zones like the Bouregreg valley, where state power becomes allied with global capital and political control over the urban poor has been extended through market mechanisms and new governmental techniques alongside traditional coercive forms. ■

Endnotes

1 *TelQuel*, September 19–25, 2009.

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3 For a more detailed historical account, see Koenraad Bogaert, *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums and Class Relations in Urban Morocco* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

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