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Decentralize for People's Power in Arab Spring Countries

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To sustainably advance human development and political stability, Arab Spring countries should decentralize to sub-national levels the resources necessary to catalyse and implement community development. Increasingly, Morocco is suggested as a model for the successful progress in the Arab Spring because of its stability, opportunities and cultural diversity. At the same time, however, there are also extremely difficult internal challenges that could undermine Morocco's future: rural poverty, youth despondency, severe economic disparity and the commonplace of exploited labour.

If Morocco could effectively implement participatory development and build democratic systems through decentralization, the model could be informative for the people of other Arab Spring countries to achieve the kind of future they seek. Morocco's development experiences and lessons are, therefore, relevant regionally and globally.

Morocco's relative social and political stability during the Arab Spring is in significant measure due to King Mohammed VI's early and consistent promotion of human development, including from 2008 and his commitment to decentralized government, now in Article I of the new Moroccan constitution of 2011.

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However, both the correct vision for development (in which Morocco has made important strides) and its successful implementation (which Morocco unfortunately has not achieved as needed) are required in order to attain long-term socio-political stability in the Arab Spring countries.

Governments – that of Iraq being an example – may be reluctant to decentralize out of a concern that this process could promote secession and become a cause of conflict. However, more often it is precisely the lack of empowerment in decision-making at the local level that heightens political resistance, tension and sectarian conflict and violence.

While decentralization may also cause national politicians and bureaucrats to feel depoliticized and less influential, the central level nevertheless remains vital in its areas of responsibility such as macroeconomic and foreign policies, national judiciary and security and development targets that encourage inter-regional balance and performance. Such centralization could also help avoid – and counter – the pitfalls of poorly implemented decentralization, such as reduced social protection and greater social and geographic stratification.

Would the sectarian turmoil and ISIS terror that exist in present-day Iraq be less – or even absent – had the nation adopted federalism (a formalized decentralized system) in 2006 or earlier? As unachievable as it seems at the present time, decentralization of power to sub-provincial levels, as close to the people as possible, appears the only viable way for Iraqis to feel more in control of their lives and to have even a modest chance of experiencing the person-to-person, Sunni-to-Shiite interaction that can, in actual fact, build

localized processes of acknowledgement of each other and shared development. If this were the case, ISIS would be rejected in the hearts and minds of most people. A form of legitimate autonomy within an overall context of national sovereignty (similar to Morocco's proposed solution for the Western Sahara, its southern provinces) could have the effect of decreasing the Shia-Sunni violence and conflict. Decentralization is also explained to increase the defence capabilities of the country by making military attack on population centers more difficult.

As a stimulus, a decentralized human development approach would see thousands of smaller projects at the local level that communities identify and control, instead of fewer, large-scale costly projects with higher associated risks. Benefits accrue for local communities from projects that are more quickly implemented. In addition, such human development is finely suited to help shorten recessions and promote growth. The participatory premise is that the timing of meetings, project implementation and of the overall development process rests with the people – acting in communities.

Villages and neighbourhoods need third party facilitators of group dialogue who apply participatory planning methods for community assessments and consensus-building. Indeed, the quantity and durability of local projects largely reflects the extent to which such facilitators are involved in this way. Facilitators could be school teachers, members of civil society, locally elected officials, university students, business people, religious leaders, retirees or development workers – potentially anyone who is in a position to interface with local communities and whom local people accept in that role.

Morocco's National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD) administered at the provincial level, created a framework for projects that reflect people's ideas as well as for the training required for local communities to determine those priority projects. Additionally, the process of Moroccan decentralization and the NIHD are synergistic, mutually reinforcing each other. The NIHD could help build new partnerships and structures of regionalization through much greater funding, training and projects – essentially the bricks and mortar of a decentralized administration. Implementing projects in this way would create the pathways, partnerships and institutional arrangements inherent in decentralized systems.

Dr Yossef Ben-Meir is president of the High Atlas Foundation, and non-profit organisation that promotes development in Morocco.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.

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