

Urban politics in Morocco: uneven development, neoliberal government and the restructuring of state power

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Public defence: 29 April 2011

Only two months before the termination of this study the Arab uprisings radically changed politics in the region. Despite – or maybe because of – the current uprisings, my main research question remained prevalent: *how do we interpret and understand political change in the Arab world today?* Today, everybody speculates about political change and democratic transition, but we must not forget that the current pressures for political change are rooted in the political changes of the last 30 years. It was these changes that were the focus of my study.

In general, the study of political change in the Arab world over the last decades has been dominated by the issue of democratization. Put simply, the debates in political science have been dominated by two broad traditions: on the one hand, there were those who believed that the Arab countries were subject to a linear transition to “liberal” democracy, and, on the other hand, there were those who were sceptic about this “transition paradigm”, arguing that authoritarianism in the Arab world had proven again and again its sustainability, renewal, persistence, etc... (Valbjørn & Bank, 2010). Probably, in the light of the recent events, these debates will continue to dominate political science on the region. However, this study – which takes Morocco as its case study – has argued that these debates have failed to grasp the fundamental significance of many of the ongoing political changes in the region. The critical question is not so much whether government in the Arab world is authoritarian or democratic, but rather *how* authoritarian modalities of government have changed over the years and how these changes have an impact on the ground, on the government of particular people and places. The most important critique from which this study departed is that the bulk of the academic debates on democratization and political transformation in the Arab region do not sufficiently (or critically) take into account the impact of and the connection with the reality of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. By neoliberalism I refer to a process of profound economic and political changes in the capitalist world system since the mid-1970s.

Neoliberal policies were introduced more than 30 years ago when several countries in the Arab region faced severe public deficit crises, to a large extent caused by the world-wide economic crises of the 1970s. As a result, many governments, including the Moroccan one, were obliged to accept – what they call – “structural adjustment policies”, promoted by international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank.

They comprised well-known measures of economic liberalization, deregulation, privatization, fiscal discipline and market-oriented development programs. It is beyond any doubt that increasing global market integration has triggered radical reforms in many Arab countries. However, I argue that the reforms of the last three decades cannot just be interpreted as mere economic reforms but that they should be understood as part of a political project. A project which cannot be understood in terms of mainstream assumptions linking free market reform to democratization. Neither can it be understood – in the case of a country such as Morocco – as just an incomplete implementation of economic reform, or just a form of *crony* capitalism, in the course of which a small minority of local corrupt elites, close to the Moroccan monarchy, skim off all the capital surpluses of that reform. Although these kinds of explanations are not necessarily wrong, they neglect a more profound process of political change of which many of the contradictions and conflicts are related to the current form of capitalism itself.

In trying to understand the significance of these political changes I looked at three processes. First, I examined how a neoliberal-inspired government actually increased uneven development and reproduced the conditions for poverty, while it often promised economic prosperity and increasing welfare for all people. Secondly, I looked at how the role of the state has changed over the last three decades. A common misconception is that globalization somehow reduces the role of the state and affects state sovereignty. In contrast, I argued that the state – or the use of state agency and state power – is still crucial. But the state has been reformed and the modes of state-intervention have changed considerably in order to improve the conditions of capital accumulation for those in power. Finally, I also tried to emphasize and show how neoliberalism is not some ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. We have to take into account the crucial role and impact of local agency and the specific nature of local contexts. In other words, we also have to take into account *how the local makes the global*. Neoliberal reforms thus always impact and depend on a setting of already existing institutional frameworks, social structures and political struggles. As a result of these different processes, authoritarianism in Morocco has been transformed profoundly in the last three decades by the ways in which the interests of local ruling elites and (global) economic elites have evolved and have become increasingly intertwined. The making of a new political world in Morocco was not only determined by “the regime”, or by internal state-society relations, but also, and increasingly, by interests and interventions related to global capitalism and contemporary neoliberal globalization.

I chose to look at two examples at the urban scale because of the important role of cities in contemporary capitalist developments. Neoliberal policies in Morocco (but also elsewhere) have intensified urban disparities over the years, turning cities more and more into spaces of extremes. First of all, I looked at how the slums in the Moroccan cities are being governed and subjected to a nationwide social development program. Secondly, I looked at the political dimension of a luxury urban development project, namely the Bouregreg-project. With these two case studies I attempted to consider both extremes of the Moroccan neoliberal city and I wanted to compare the specific political logics behind these two extremes and find out in which ways these two cases are part of a broader political project for the Moroccan city.

My first case study focussed on the ambitious Cities without Slums Program which was launched in 2004. The program was the first nation-wide program that tried to re-integrate all Moroccan slums and its population by the end of 2012 (the new deadline is 2015). The program targets over 1.5 million inhabitants in more than 1000 slums spread over 83 cities. The main objective is to move slum dwellers from their informal and illegally occupied shelters to social housing apartments. The participation of the slum dwellers is one of the official priorities of the development program and new state institutions are strongly supporting the cooperation between the private sector and the slum dwellers. However, looking beyond the official discourse of poverty alleviation, participatory development and social re-integration, the program is not just some politically-neutral social development scheme. First of all, the participation of the slum dwellers is reduced to the effort of convincing these people to move and to facilitate them with all the different procedures that the transfer involves. The whole process is managed top-down and the slum dwellers have very little influence on the decision-making process. Secondly, in the framework of this program, new mechanisms were developed to make sure that the slum dwellers are able to finance their move and to make sure that private actors would be willing to engage. As such, new credit mechanisms for slum dwellers, new public-private partnerships and specific tax-exemptions for private construction companies were developed. I argue that these mechanisms can be seen as new ways to make profits and accumulate wealth. In this regard, the main objective of the cities without slums program is not so much poverty alleviation or social development, but the integration of the urban poor into the formal urban economy by obliging them to buy an apartment and turning them into legal home-owners. The real problems of urban poverty – education, healthcare, employment – are still largely ignored and as a result poverty is actually reproduced. In other words, the program does not offer a solution for urban poverty, it just tries to move the problem out of the city-centre because a lot of the people are relocated often far away from their original living-places.

My second case study dealt with an urban mega-project. In January 2006, king Mohamed VI officially launched the Bouregreg-project. It is an ambitious project for the redevelopment of the Bouregreg river valley between the cities of Rabat and Salé. The project covers a territory of 6000 hectares and over the course of the following years the project foresees the construction of a port for cruise-ships, two marinas, luxury hotels, apartments, villas, commercial centres, etc. The first stage of the project will be finished by 2013. These kinds of projects are part of the government's effort to reinforce the position of urban economies in a context of rapidly changing global competitive conditions and demonstrate a 'developing' country's willingness to engage in global capitalism. The Bouregreg project has to accelerate the rhythm of (foreign) investments and promote the cities' unique selling position. Politically, the Moroccan authorities intervened in the urban economy by creating a new institutional arrangement to govern the zone. They established the Bouregreg Agency, which is an autonomous state agency responsible for the development of the complete zone. As a result, state power was thus displaced

to an exceptional institution that existed separate from more conventional government arrangements like for example the local, elected authorities. With the example of the Bouregreg Agency, I wanted to demonstrate how the state is not simply dominated by a small but obvious power centre or regime, in this case the monarchy, but rather how state power is subject to constant renegotiation between different actors, both foreign and domestic, public and private, that are integrated and operating on the field of the state. The Bouregreg agency is a state-agency that is for example implicated in strategic partnerships with private investors. As this case shows, government becomes more accountable to investors, often coming from abroad, than to its own citizens.

With these two case studies, which were analysed within a broader historical framework of neoliberal reform in Morocco, I explored some of the recent directions and perspectives that enable us to understand political change as a process that is, without any doubt, intimately related to the changes and shifts within global capitalism. Furthermore, I emphasized how local politics are closely related to shifting power balances in global capitalism and how these shifts result in the “localization” of wider political interests and projects that involve local, national, regional and global actors (Smith, 1998). If we look beyond the specific ideological packaging of social development schemes such as the Cities without Slums Program – with its focus on participatory development, the virtues of home-ownership, etc. – and mega-projects like the Bouregreg-project – with its focus on attracting investments, tourists, jobs and economic prosperity – we see that a political reality is revealed in which not so much poverty alleviation and socio-economic development *per se* really matter, but rather how these political objectives can be integrated in a neoliberal project. The Moroccan neoliberal urban project in which public authorities participated prioritises the *exchange value* of the city (centred around the question: how can we sell the city?), over and above the *use value* of the city (which should mean how can we make the best possible city for our citizens?) (Lefebvre, 1996). As such, Morocco shows a lot of comparisons with urban politics in the rest of the world. Urban government in Morocco works primarily for investors, tourists and the rich, and focuses on the development of the *city-centre*, while most other people are going to be pushed more and more to the peripheries of the cities, either by obligation (through the Cities without Slums Program) or by necessity (because city-life in the centre has become too expensive). As a result, one of the main conclusions is that uneven development in Morocco, and by extension elsewhere in the Arab region, is not a (temporary?) problem of some regions, cities or even populations that are “lagging behind” and need to “catch up” in order to reach our level of development (in the sense that they are “developing” and we are “developed”). To the contrary, uneven development is the inherent result of neoliberal capitalist globalization itself. So, in contrast to a popular understanding of globalization, often pictured as some kind of unavoidable, even natural, process to which we all have to adapt, I described some of the urban politics that are implicated in the making of that globalization.

References

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