

MOROCCO'S MIGRATION REFORM OF 2013: A GEOSTRATEGIC MOVE BEYOND HUMAN RIGHTS

SOFYAN ESSARRAOUI

PHD STUDENT

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, EÖTVÖS LORAND UNIVERSITY

SOESSARRAOUI@STUDENT.ELTE.HU



Abstract

Morocco has gained global prominence in migration, evolving into a country of emigration, transit, and immigration. Reinforcing this prominence is its 2013 migration reform, which marked a departure from decades of restrictive policies. Previously, migration was governed by Law 02-03, which focused on security, regarding the entry (immigration), stay (residence), and movement of foreigners, as well as issues related to emigration and irregular immigration. In 2013, King Mohammed VI announced a human rights-driven and participatory migration policy, marking a shift away from security-based measures. While widely praised, this reform raised questions about its underlying drivers and motivation, given several structural and practical inconsistencies. Beyond the outlined social dynamics, this study examines Morocco's migration reform through Abdelmalek Sayad's theory of 'thinking the state' (1990), which links migration policies to broader geostrategic and diplomatic ambitions. It explores how Morocco's radical reform has been strategically instrumentalized to forge an international brand image and secure geostrategic and foreign policy goals, particularly in Africa. This study is based on fieldwork (semi-structured interviews) conducted in-person in Morocco and via teleconferencing tools with migration policy experts in Morocco and with Moroccan migration stakeholders, providing insights into the reform's underlying drivers and its role in shaping Morocco's regional influence. The fieldwork revealed that Morocco's migration reform, on the one hand, serves to portray the monarchy as a progressive and human-rights-driven regime, and on the other, enables Morocco to assume a leadership role on both continental and regional levels.

Migration, Morocco, diplomacy, sub-Saharan Africa, geopolitics

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Prior to the enactment of the migration reform known as ‘New Migration Policies’ in 2013, Morocco’s governance of migration was channelled through a security-focused and highly restrictive legislation, the so-called Law 02-03. Enacted in 2003, the law governs the entry (immigration), stay (residence), and movement of foreigners, as well as issues related to emigration and irregular immigration (IOM, 2017). It establishes that illegal border crossing to or through Morocco is punishable under the country’s criminal law. This placed the law under substantial criticism from both national and international analysts. For instance, Gazzotti (2018) argued that the law 02-03 in its design is not only an emblematic of a hostile institutional stance but it also spreads seeds of systematic violence and does not make any reference for migrants’ rights. Other political scientists (see Lahlou, 2015; Khachani, 2011; Belguendouz, 2003) have often characterized the law as a product of the European migration policy imperatives, pushing Morocco to play ‘Europe’s gendarme.’ Üstübici (2015) also emphasized that the Law 02-03, in essence, represents an “attempt to govern migration in the EU sense of the term and a way to improve relations with the EU” (p. 246).

A major turning point took place in September 2013, when the King Mohammed VI announced a ground-breaking step, initiating the New Migration Policy. This policy framework did not only recognize Morocco as an immigration nation, but also shifted the country’s migration governance from a predominantly security-oriented framework to one grounded on human rights and humanitarian principles (Naama, 2017). It introduced major reforms, including two unprecedented regularization campaigns implemented in 2014 and 2017 targeting irregular migrants, the enactment of law 27.14 on anti-trafficking, and the establishment of inter-ministerial institutions namely the Directorate of Migration Affairs within the Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Living Abroad and Migration Affairs. Moreover, a National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum Seeker (henceforth SNIA) was developed to facilitate migrants’ integration in Morocco (Gazzotti, 2022).

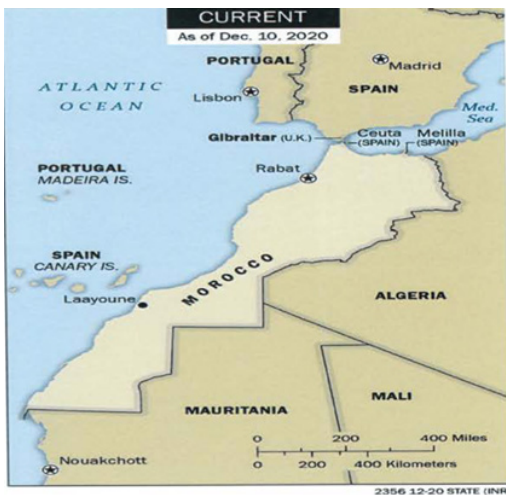
Despite these robust reforms, major constraints continue to restrict sub-Saharan Africans’ integration and undermine the rather holistic and forward-looking integration model Morocco strives to establish (Berriane, 2015; IOM, 2017). This perceived mismatch between policy ambitions and practical outcomes constitute the core concern of the present study. It specifically attempts to answer a major question which is: What prompted Morocco to overhaul its migration policies? An answer to this question requires examining Morocco’s migration governance, focusing on their underlying drivers and impacts. To this end, the study employs a qualitative approach, guided by semi-structured interviews conducted in Morocco with sub-Saharan African migrants, Moroccan stakeholders, and to a lesser extent with civil society actors. The interviews were conducted in Tangier and Rabat. The choice of these two cities is justified by their attributes that reinforce their significance to migration within the kingdom. Rabat is the capital city of Morocco and hosts a wide range of administrations and institutions providing services to migrants. The city hence is an important stopping point for immigrants in Morocco to fulfil administra-

tive procedures such as applying for residence permits, etc. Tangier on the other hand, is a city situated in the Northern region renowned for its proximity to Spain at only 14 Kilometres. Due to this proximity, Tangier is home a sizeable number of sub-Saharan African migrants, especially those tried to cross to Europe but ultimately failed. In terms of time frame, this study focuses primarily on the period 2013 onward, which is widely recognized as a turning point in Morocco's migration governance. It marked the launch of the NMP, signalling Morocco's alleged break with its past of migration governance and control which was predominantly framed through a security lens.

2. Background

Morocco has long been a site of complex mobility making it a compelling case within global migration systems. Historically the country's geographical and geopolitical positioning-situated as the crossroad of Europe, Africa and the Middle East has shaped the patterns of movement into, from, and through the country.

In earlier centuries, Morocco served as a hub for trade, pilgrimage, and education, attracting individuals from across the African continent and beyond. In recent decades, particularly since early 2000s, it has evolved into a transit country, facilitating the movement of sub-Saharan Africans towards Europe- perceived as 'European Eldorado'. Several factors underpin this trend, notably Morocco's geographical vicinity to Europe separated by only 14 Kilometres (see the map below). Morocco is bordered by Algeria to the east the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Mauritania to the south, and Spain to the north (Fitzhugh, 2005). This strategic positioning enhances the country's prominence within contemporary mobility trajectories, particularly those linking the Global South to the Global North.



Map 1: Morocco in the World. Source: Office of the Geographical and Global Issues, Department of State. Guidance Bulletin No.38, December 16, 2020

Although it remains a country of transit, Morocco has gradually transformed into a destination on its own promoted by its economic evolution, political stability, and the country's proactive expansion southwards, through tightening its relations with sub-Saharan African countries (El Ghazouani, 2019). These shifting dynamics paved the way for substantial institutional and legal responses. In 2013, Mohammed VI announced Morocco's overhaul of its migration policies by introducing a comprehensive, human rights-driven, and participatory framework, moving away from its restrictive and security-driven approach. This reform "launched a liberal migration agenda, the so-called 'New Migration policy (NMP),' structured around three pillars: migrants' regularization, a set of integration measures and legal reforms, as well as an intensified migration diplomacy" (Natter, 2019: 86). The inception of this unprecedented migration reform has been widely celebrated. However, numerous structural and practical inconsistencies within this policy prompted several analysts to question the real drivers and underlying motives behind this comprehensive overhaul. This becomes particularly evident when examining the components of the New Migration Policy. The latter sought to establish a new migration law known as Law 72.17 aimed to replace the Law 02-03 on immigration. This policy shift seemingly attests to Morocco's genuine commitment to transiting its migration policy directions from repression, security and 'blockage', which characterized Law 02-03 to a more open, inclusive and humanist migration governance (Natter, 2013). The implementation of the Law 72.17 has not materialized into forceable law. To date, no immigration legislation has been enacted to amend Law 02-03 (Zaanoun, 2023).

This policy inaction and lack of progress in swiftly adopting the draft Law 72.17 means that "the legal framework on immigration remains mostly untouched" (Natter 2019, 114). The law 02-03 remains the only legislation governing migration in Morocco, undermining its desire to rupture with its inhumane migration management past. There is an underlying ambiguity around the reasons for this policy deadlock. Natter (2019) attributed this to the structural deficiencies among relevant institutions. She emphasized that the Moroccan migration policy is characterized by diverging institutional visions, and a lack of coherence, which, as a consequence, significantly limit the application of several migration reforms. Benjelloun (2020), in a similar vein, noted that this ambiguity stems from Morocco "competing interest that are often very difficult to reconcile" (p. 882); On the one hand, Morocco wants to secure a strong and advanced status with the EU by showing its active engagement in migration, but this ambition is confronted by the kingdom's growing interest in expanding its role continentally. Stuck between these strategic ambitions, Morocco opts for a delicate balance that will satisfy both its European and African partners.

3. Theoretical framework

Scholars such as Natter (2019), Adamson, and Tsouparas, as well as Perrin, have argued that migration policies are integral to a country's geopolitical positioning. Abdelmalek Sayad is particularly influential for his theory of 'thinking the state.' This theory suggests that migration is a *social fact* best understood through a socio-

logical lens. Expanding on this idea, Boudou (2023) argued that Sayad's approach uncovers the social conditions that shape migration policies, state assessment, and political discourse. Though grounded in sociology, Sayad's theory incorporates insights from multiple disciplines, rendering it mainly relevant for political theorists by virtue of its emphasis on exposing drivers for migration policies (ibid).

Sayad's theory of 'thinking the state' provides an invaluable framework for understanding migration policies. It highlights that immigration policies serve as a reflection of "how the State thinks of itself" (Sayad, 1999: 6) and that interrogating immigration policies inherently entails interrogating the state's underlying principles and structures (Sayad, 2010). Applying this to Morocco, Benjelloun (2024) argued that immigration policies are strategically instrumentalized to "forge an international brand image" (p. 237), rather than aiming solely to provide a genuine pathway for migrants to integrate. This is amply reflected in the inconsistencies within several migration frameworks, such as the SNIA, where only one of three draft bills has been formally adopted (Cherti and Collyer, 2015). This strongly suggests that migration reform is not primarily a matter of internal factors, although it played a crucial role, but rather part of a broader geopolitical agenda in which Morocco reorients itself towards Africa (Natter, 2019).

4. Civil Society Pressure?

The first trend links Morocco's migration reform to internal social dynamics, pushed by civil society and migrant groups (Bendra, 2019). Moroccan Civil society and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) reported that sub-Saharan Africans lived in precarious conditions (GADEM, 2013), extreme poverty, and police brutality (Moroccan Association of Human Right, 2015; 2019), exacerbating their vulnerability (Doctors Without Borders, 2013), and exposing them to violence both along the Moroccan borders and/or within the territory (National Platform for Migrants' Protection, 2016). Although the reform was announced following the publication of several reports, it appears to reinforce the position of many analysts who argued that the reform was primarily influenced by pressure from civil society organizations and migrant advocacy groups. Officials from the Ministry of Moroccan Residents Abroad and Migration Affairs (MCMREAM) have acknowledged this influence, stating that "there has never been a public policy like this [in Morocco] executed with such a high level of coordination with civil society. We do nothing without coordination with civil society" (Norman, 2016: 429).

This narrative describes the reform as a neo-institutionalist, bottom-up process, whereby civil society organizations gained visibility and influence (Norman, 2016). The monarchy, which has always been seen and represented itself as a key agent of change (Natter, 2018), was receptive to these organizations' demands, particularly those concerning the human rights of migrants. Notably, prior to the King's announcement of the comprehensive reform, several organizations, such as GADEM, published critical reports warning against the precarious status and the mistreatment of migrants in Morocco. One such report, published in August 2013, led to further

condensed reports, including a remarkable report by the CNDH. This report was discussed in a closed session with the Moroccan Parliament in September 2013, just days before the King publicly announced the reform on September 10, 2013. This timeline has reinforced the narrative that civil society lobbying directly influenced and eventually led to the reform. Further emphasizing the role of civil society and migrant groups is Jacobs' (2014) statement, which highlights that the work of several Moroccan organizations in documenting abuses against migrants has been critical in bringing the issues to the forefront, both nationally and internationally. This has eventually prompted Morocco to radically change its migration governance.

Countering this narrative, GADEM, along with other civil actors, stressed that the reform was less about their mobilization and more about Morocco's fear of international condemnation and shaming. Morocco invests heavily in cultivating a positive global reputation, projecting a discourse of 'exceptionalism' that highlights its role as an example of modernization, democratization, and economic liberalization (Jacobs, 2014). Nevertheless, when several reports, particularly GADEM's, were publicized, Morocco's favourable image, which it had tried to showcase, was strongly challenged. A respondent involved in Morocco's discussion during the 19th session of the Implementation Monitoring Committee of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members in Switzerland stated that:

"GADEM's presentation of its report in Geneva was certainly seen as a shame and humiliation to Morocco on the international level. Morocco has always given paramount importance to its international image, which is now distorted by GADEM's report. This has eventually propelled the King to hastily announce the country's adoption of the new comprehensive reform." (Informant11)

Further reinforcing this view, the same respondent added that the reform announcement was unexpected:

"We were informed of the reform just the moment the king was preparing to make his speech." (ibid)

These accounts suggest that civil society played a vital role in bringing migration issues to international attention. A respondent from the IOM mission in Morocco affirms this influence, stating that "Although [our] work is crucial in bringing migrants' in-country conditions to the public, it would be erroneous to assume that Morocco's migration policies are a direct result of our work. Rather, it is a vision" (Informant 14). This view suggests that the global scrutiny and reputational damage, or shaming, ultimately motivated Morocco to act. Two key accounts are pertinent in tackling this global influence. First, Morocco has consistently aspired to foster strong relations with the European Union (EU), and one way of achieving this is through reforming its policies, particularly those related to human rights (Lowe et al., 2020). Although this article acknowledges this influence, it is beyond its scope to explore the impact of this relation on migration policies in significant depth. A second account pertains to Morocco's shift towards the Global South, motivated by geopolitical imperatives (Natter, 2019).

Norman (2016) argued that the government's collaboration with civil society organizations was not a genuine commitment to their cause but more a strategic move "thereby limiting their ability to defy the state" (p. 432). In this regard, Arbaoui noted that despite civil society organizations being involved in discussions and consultations, their role remains extremely limited. This is evident in several initiatives, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which Morocco adopted on December 10, 2018, in Marrakech (UNHCR, 2018). Although civil society organizations participated in the consultation rounds leading up to the adoption of the Compact, they were unable to influence any changes to it, despite raising several important issues. For instance, GADEM claimed that the final draft of the GCM not only failed to enhance migrants' rights but also failed to uphold pre-existing ones, such as the UN Migrant Workers Convention (Arbaoui, 2022). This emphasizes the notion that while civil society may play an active role in drafting migration policy initiatives, its involvement often does not lead to meaningful changes. Instead, it may simply serve as a 'show' (Arbaoui, 2022). This highlights the pressing need to examine in depth key factors influencing migration policy development in Morocco, allowing us to answer the question: why did Morocco launch the reform at this specific moment?

Morocco invests heavily in cultivating a positive global reputation, projecting a discourse of 'exceptionalism' that highlights its role as an example of modernization, democratization, and economic liberalization.

5. Geopolitical Leadership in Africa

An alternative approach ties Morocco's migration reform to pressing geopolitical ambitions on a continental level. Informant 11 emphasized that migration functions as a "a geopolitical currency used by states to negotiate geopolitics, and Morocco is no exception". This view argues that the migration reform was part of a broader strategy to secure geopolitical gains on the continent, particularly in relation to the territorial dispute over the Sahara. Norman (2016) argued that the timing of the reform coincided with a period in which Morocco's efforts were directed towards assuming a leadership role on the continent, both economically and geopolitically, by deepening its relations with many African states and re-joining the African Union (AU) (Benjelloun, 2024). Lowe et al. (2020) also noted that Morocco's geopolitical considerations are a strong background against which its migration policies are formulated. This policy ambition shapes the welcoming approach that Morocco expressed to migrants from the rest of Africa.

This ambition was reinforced by a series of unprecedented, high-profile diplomatic efforts, exemplified by King Mohammed VI's official visits to more than thirty-five

sub-Saharan countries, including Senegal, Nigeria, and Mali, to establish new trade partnerships and expand Morocco's sphere of influence (Norman, 2016). Daher observed that "Moroccan economic diplomacy is no longer satisfied with a simple policy of trade agreements but also relies on the creation of economic networks and direct and personal contacts between Moroccan and African economic actors" (2018: 4). Consequently, over 500 bilateral agreements have been signed across a wide spectrum of fields encompassing "trade and the promotion of investments, infrastructure, transport and projects related to human development" (Hasnaoui, 2017: 11).

For instance, in Senegal, Morocco signed two bilateral agreements, "one increasing cooperation on international land transport of goods and persons, and one related to mining, hydrocarbons, electricity, and renewable energies." (Norman 2016, 435). Similarly, during a visit to Mali, Mohammed VI attended the inauguration of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, a move interpreted as a "stark and brash" attempt to reshape power dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel. This visit has been a driving force, allowing Morocco and Mali to further boost trade and foster commercial relations (Morocco Ministry of Trade and Commerce, 2018). It also strengthened investment ties in the mining and hydrocarbon sectors (Norman, 2016). With Nigeria, Morocco pursued a win-win partnership, as demonstrated by the official visits of King Mohammed VI to Nigeria in 2016 and the visit of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to Morocco in 2018. These visits laid the groundwork for a groundbreaking partnership between the two nations, exemplified by the launch of the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline Project.

Beyond economic interests, Morocco's geostrategic strategy towards the global South has extended to its long-standing territorial conflict over the Sahara – a central issue and a key determinant in the country's foreign policy since independence. Given the relatively stagnant UN-led efforts (Pothoven, 2002), Morocco has relied heavily on the support of other African nations to support its claim of 'self-governance' over the region, making its engagement with the continent crucial to its broader geopolitical strategy. However, the country's withdrawal from the Organization of African Unity (OAU)- the AU's predecessor- in protest of the organization's admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a member state, significantly weakened its diplomatic position (Rawhani, 2018). This "empty chair policy" (Hasnaoui 2017, 2) was widely criticized as a strategic miscalculation, limiting Morocco's continental outreach to a very few West African states (El-Katiri, 2015) and hampering its chance to serve any meaningful political roles on the continent (Bennis, 2021). On the other hand, Morocco's absence, for more than three decades, provided free rein for Algeria, Morocco's traditional rival and the main SADR's backer, to 'freely' extend its influence within the OAU, implementing its territorial agenda. By 1982, 25 African countries¹ had recognized the SADR as a sovereign state (Naldi, 1982).

These rapidly evolving dynamics among African nations served as a catalyst, prompting Morocco to reassess its African policy and reconsider its decision to leave the AU. In January 2017, King Mohammed VI formally announced Morocco's return to its "home," the AU (Mohammed VI, 2017). Following this 'Grand Return,'

Morocco intensively mobilized its institutions and diplomatic apparatus towards two objectives: first, countering Algeria's influence by breaking African nations' recognition of the SADR (Hasnaoui, 2017), and second, to extend its outreach beyond West Africa to include East and Southern countries (Bennis, 2021). This active diplomacy bore fruit, culminating in Morocco's securing positive neutrality from Nigeria and Ethiopia. Moreover, 28 states called for the immediate suspension of the SADR's membership in the AU (Rawhani, 2018), signalling a substantial turn in Africa's power dynamics.

To consolidate these diplomatic victories, Morocco coherently blended economic incentives, like debt cancellation for several African countries (Hasnaoui, 2017), with a humanistic approach that "prioritizes actions that have a direct impact on the daily lives of populations" (Saaf, 2017: 3). This humanistic orientation was exemplified by Morocco's 2013 New Comprehensive Migration Policy, which primarily targeted mainly sub-Saharan African populations.

Analysts argue that this welcoming migration policy has profoundly contributed to fostering Morocco's ties with sub-Saharan nations, allowing it, at least in part, to garner support for its autonomy plan over the disputed territories in the South (Norman, 2016). Echoing this argument, Benjelloun (2024) contends that Morocco's driver behind the overhaul of its migration legislation was primarily driven by foreign policy objectives, particularly concerning its territorial sovereignty over the disputed Southern territories. By enhancing the living conditions of sub-Saharan Africans within its borders, Morocco sought to garner diplomatic backing from their home countries.

Morocco's evolving migration policies have played a substantial role in realigning its diplomatic relations with African nations. This is especially evident in its evolving relations with several African states before and after its migration policy shift. For example, Cape Verde, Togo, Sierra Leone, Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Eswatini, Zambia, and Chad- countries that had previously recognized the SADR before 2013- have since opened consulates in Laayoune and Dakhla, two major cities situated in the southern territories of Morocco. This shift reflects a broader trend across African states towards supporting Morocco's territorial integrity and legitimacy over the disputed territory (MDCMREAM, 2022). By 2024, "32 countries and regional organizations had opened consulates in these cities, affirming the irreversible recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over its territories in the Sahara" (Abba, 2024: 5)², marking a significant success for Moroccan diplomacy (Wust and Nicolai, 2023). Commenting on this shift, Natter observed that Morocco's management of migration has been characterized by a double approach: a 'selective opening' for migrant groups from countries supporting Morocco's sovereignty, and a 'restrictive opening' for migrants from countries supporting the SADR.

6. Morocco's Migration Policies and Diplomacy in Africa

Morocco's migration policies are intricately aligned with broader international diplomatic strategies. In line with this strategy, Morocco has shifted from its restric-

tive migration policies towards a more welcoming approach, positioning itself as a “regional model of responsible management of migration” (MDCMREAM, 2018). One of the respondents affirms this by stating that “the new migration policies stem from the monarch’s will. There certainly would not have been such a policy without his consent/willingness” (Informant 11). Natter (2019) argued that this shift aims to strategically portray the regime as a ‘liberal’ and progressive both on national and international fronts. Initiatives such as the SNIA and various integration policies are not ends in themselves, but rather instruments pursued to bolster the monarchy’s legitimacy- essentially “crafting a liberal monarchy” (Natter, 2019: 104). Similarly, Morocco’s anti-human trafficking law serves as a symbolic commitment to international norms, reinforcing its progressive image (Natter, 2019). Law 27-14 represents Morocco’s first legislative effort to establish a clear and comprehensive definition of trafficking in Persons (TIP). This law brings the country’s domestic legal framework in line with the international Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, particularly Women and Children, which Morocco ratified in 2011 (MCMREAM, 2021).

Morocco’s anti-human trafficking law serves as a symbolic commitment to international norms, reinforcing its progressive image.

The theoretical framework provided by Abdelmalek Sayad offers an invaluable lens through which to analyse how migration policies are utilized as a means of securing diplomatic leverage. Sayad’s concept of ‘thinking the state’ (1999) posits that immigration policies serve as a reflection of state ideology. By examining immigration policies, one simultaneously gains insights into the state’s structures and geopolitical orientation (Sayad, 1999). According to Sayad, “immigration is undeniably a subversive factor to the extent that it reveals in broad daylight the hidden truth and the deepest foundations of the social and political order we describe as national” (2004:280). Sayad’s statement underscores that immigration policies, though produced by states, should not be viewed solely as internal processes, “but must be related to the international elements of a state’s self-image” (Cherti and Collyer, 2015). This argument is echoed in Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) concept of migration diplomacy. Defined as “the use of diplomatic tools, processes and procedures to manage cross-border population mobility, including [...] the strategic use of migration flows as a means to obtain other aims” (2019: 116), migration diplomacy becomes a diplomatic resource, deployed strategically to support broader political aims. Following this logic, Geopolitical culture, what Sayad terms ‘how a state thinks of itself’, profoundly shapes migration policy directions, including immigration (Cherti and Collyer, 2015).

Morocco’s migration policies, particularly towards sub-Saharan Africans, illustrate the way in which immigration becomes highly integral to the state’s self-conception internationally. By virtue of their presence in the country, sub-Saharan

African immigrants become inextricably linked to the country's diplomatic and geopolitical engagement with their countries of origin. For instance, Morocco's regularization campaigns of 2014 and 2017 were essential tools in consolidating Morocco's political standing within the AU (Martin, 2015). These initiatives reinforced Morocco's position as a capable influencer of the conditions of migrants in Africa, thereby enhancing its diplomatic standing.

It is worth noting that prior to the adoption of these regularization campaigns, sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco were mostly in an irregular situation. Data from the Moroccan High Commission for Planning (HCP) indicate that, as of the 2014 national census, 86,000 sub-Saharan Africans were residing in Morocco. Over 65% of these immigrants were regularized by the two regularization campaigns. Despite these campaigns being harshly criticized for their overly restrictive measures, mainly requiring a five-year residency permit, Natter (2021) argued that they function as mechanisms by which the Moroccan regime constructed a liberal outlook. As a consequence, Morocco has garnered recognition from the African Union for its unique and advanced approach to migration governance on the continent. This acknowledgement is evidenced by Mohammed VI's appointment as "champion" of African migration governance (Baida, 2020).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article discusses the impulses prompting Morocco to shift away from its overly restrictive migration approach towards a more human-centered framework. It outlined internal drivers, shaped predominantly by the civil society's lobbying for a human rights-based approach, given the vulnerability and the precarious living conditions many migrants face. Civil society and migrant focused groups highlight the harsh conditions, such as police brutality and human rights breaches, faced by many migrants, leading to intense international and national media coverage. No doubt, these have substantially contributed to Morocco's decision to enact reform. Despite this achievement, it would be erroneous to suggest that Moroccan migration reform resulted primarily from them. Rather, external factors, such as geopolitical ambitions and foreign diplomacy, emerge as two significant factors that have influenced the development of migration policies.

- *Diplomatic and Geostrategic Ambitions:* Morocco withdrew from the African Union in 1984, in protest to the admission of the SADR. Ever since, the country has focused its diplomacy on the North, mainly the EU. This is evident in several initiatives undertaken by Morocco and the EU, focusing on security and migration. Not only that, but Morocco has submitted an application to join the EU. Though not accepted, Morocco's aspiration culminated in securing an advanced status with the EU. Notwithstanding this status, Morocco's foreign diplomacy has been characterized by imbalance. Acknowledging this, Morocco engaged in rebalancing its foreign diplomacy by turning towards Southern nations. This has been driven by an intensive diplomatic visit, culminating in the country's eventual re-joining of the AU in 2017 and securing numerous bilateral partnerships

with African countries, including support for its territorial dispute. Part of this diplomatic strategy was carried out by Morocco's reform of its migration policies, realigning them with its strategic diplomatic ambitions toward African nations.

- *Crafting a Liberal Image*: Morocco's migration reform serves to bolster the country's international standing as a progressive and human-rights-driven nation. Morocco is recognized as a key regional and global actor in migration governance (Belamghari, 2024). It has earned credits from the African Union, led a major migration forum, and hosted the Global Compact for Migration (GCM). These achievements underscore Morocco's success in migration diplomacy, consolidating its leadership role in human rights and migration management on both regional and global stages (Benjelloun, 2024). ☀

Notes

- 1 Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Chad, Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Laos, Lesotho, Libya, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Eswatini (Swaziland), Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.
- 2 Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Chad, Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Laos, Lesotho, Libya, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Eswatini (Swaziland), Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

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Appendix:

List of Interview Informants:

| Interviewee Code | Country of Origin | Gender | Profession | Mode of interview |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|---|--------------------------|
| Informant 1 | Senegal | Male | President of Association | In person |
| Informant 2 | Guinea | Male | President of NGO | Online, Teams |
| Informant 3 | Ghana | Male | Doctor at Military Hospital in Rabat | In person |
| Informant 4 | Mali | Male | Student | In person |
| Informant 5 | Mali | Male | Student | In person |
| Informant 6 | Sudan | Female | Refugee | In person |
| Informant 7 | Sudan | Male | Refugee | In person |
| Informant 8 | Somalia | Male | Student | In person |
| Informant 9 | Niger | Male | Student | In person |
| Informant 10 | Rwanda | Female | Student | In person |
| Informant 11 | Morocco | Female | Former staff at Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Human right consultant, IOM | Online and in-person |
| Informant 12 | Morocco | Male | Policy expert and University Professor, Rabat | Online, Teams |
| Informant 13 | Morocco | Male | Project Manager, Migration and Mobility and Communication coordinator at Heinrich Boll Stiftung Rabat | Online and in person |
| Informant 14 | Morocco | Male | Project Assistant on Policy research at IOM | Online, google meets |
| Informant 15 | France | Male | Pope and activist | Online, Teams |
| Informant 16 | Spain | Male | Consultant, researcher and University Professor | Online, Teams |
| Informant 17 | Spain | Male | Director of a research Network on Migration | Online, Teams |