

## Introduction

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The meeting you are attending today is a purely academic and scientific seminar focused on comparing regional autonomy arrangements as a means of solving intra- or sub-state conflicts and fostering sustainable development. I would like to thank the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco for this initiative, which is part of a series of seminars organized since 2009 in Geneva, Dakhla and New York. These seminars are aimed at comparing the provisions proposed by Morocco for the autonomy of the Sahara region with the experience of other regions of the world in terms of regional or territorial autonomy. Among the various angles considered were: human rights and democracy; governance in autonomy statutes; the management of natural resources in autonomy statutes; representation and legitimacy in autonomy negotiations; autonomy statutes and regionalization; solidarity and equalization between regions; the development model for autonomous regions; regional commissions of national human rights councils in autonomous regions; civil society and non governmental organizations in autonomous regions; external relations of autonomous regions and cross-border cooperation. Renowned experts thus shared their experience and the lessons learned that could benefit the Moroccan autonomy initiative for the Sahara. They came from the most diverse countries or regions: Canada, the Caribbean, Denmark, France, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Italy, Mexico, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Serbia, Spain, Tanzania, etc.

The Initiative presented to the Security Council of the United Nations in 2007 by Morocco for the autonomy of the Sahara region aimed at settling this long-standing dispute remains more relevant than ever. It was put forward in response to the appeal made by the Security Council to the parties and the states of the region to continue to cooperate fully with the United Nations to end the current impasse and to achieve progress towards a political solution. In its resolutions adopted following the presentation of this initiative, the Security Council stated that Morocco's efforts were "serious and credible". In resolution 2351 dated 28 April 2017, the Council thus unanimously welcomed "serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution [of the Sahara dispute], and recalled that "realism and a spirit of compromise by the parties are essential to achieve progress in negotiations".

For the record, this Initiative is intended to make sure that "the Sahara populations will themselves run their affairs democratically, through legislative, executive and judicial bodies enjoying exclusive powers. They will have the financial resources needed for the region's development in all fields, and will take an active part in the nation's economic, social and cultural life." According to article 12 of the Initiative, "In keeping with democratic principles and procedures, and acting through legislative, executive and judicial bodies, the populations of the Sahara autonomous Region shall exercise powers, within the Region's territorial boundaries, mainly over the following:

Region's local administration, local police force and jurisdictions; in the economic sector: economic development, regional planning, promotion of investment, trade, industry, tourism and agriculture; Region's budget and taxation; infrastructure: water, hydraulic facilities, electricity, public works and transportation; in the social sector: housing, education, health, employment, sports, social welfare and social security; cultural affairs, including promotion of the Saharan Hassani cultural heritage; environment."

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As can be seen, the autonomy thus given to the Sahara populations is considerable, often much more extended than that provided for in most autonomy statutes in the world, as noted during several past seminars. Since 2008, several fundamental reforms have even strengthened this move towards decentralization and regionalization. The new 2011 Moroccan Constitution introduced the principle of administrative freedom of the regions and gives them primary responsibility in the field of economic, social, cultural, integrated and sustainable development. This reform, which integrates the principle of "advanced regionalization", brings about several important innovations: the principle of subsidiarity (art. 140 (1)) on the basis of which "territorial collectivities have their own competences, competences divided with the State and those which are transferable to them by the latter." It also provides for the direct election of regional councils, which strengthens the involvement of the populations in the management of their own affairs, as well as the accountability of elected representatives to the population. It then also provides for the transfer of the power to implement the decisions of regional councils to the presidents of these assemblies, which confirms territorial decentralization meant to entrust local elected representatives with executive power over territorial authorities.

Moreover, this reform provides for the creation of participation and dialogue mechanisms to foster the involvement of citizens and associations in the design of, and follow up to, development projects. Based on Morocco's new administrative boundaries, three provinces correspond, wholly or in part, to the territory of the future autonomous region of the Sahara. As stated by His Majesty the King, "the development projects taking place in the region and the opportunities presented by advanced regionalization to effectively involve the populations of the region in the management of their own affairs, will turn the Sahara region into an integrated economic hub." In this respect, a new development model for the Sahara was launched in 2015 with a budget of US\$ 8 billion, in order to create 12 000 jobs and turn the region into an economic, social and environmental hub.

Besides, the King of Morocco set up an Advisory Committee on Regionalization (ACR) mandated to develop a "Moroccan model of regionalization" based on the country's specificities, with a view to "moving from a budding regionalization to an advanced democratic regionalization dedicated to development". In its final report, the Commission put forward proposals meant to reinforce the notion of advanced democratic regionalization through the revitalization of representative democracy, the widening of participatory democracy, the creation of new possibilities for women's participation, by giving development-focused social democracy more prominence, in order to cope with under-development, fight unequal development and regional disparities and, more generally, foster the nation's economic and social development. In this respect, in 2015 Morocco organized regional elections for the first time in the framework of the new reform of advanced regionalization. Two presidents of the Sahara regions were democratically elected to head Laayoune and Dakhla's regional councils.

This trend toward regionalization is mirrored in many countries which have understood that it offered genuine possibilities to promote the resolution of long-standing conflicts and foster sustainable economic, social, cultural and environmental development. We shall now hear the experts who will compare their national arrangements with the Moroccan model. These experts are: Professor **Nguyen Manh Hung**, from the Institute for Africa and Middle East Studies, Hanoi (Vietnam), who will discuss South-East Asia's regional autonomy; Dr **Wilfried Swenden**, from the University of Edinburgh (United Kingdom), who will look into the cases of several European countries; and Professor **Stephen Tomblin**, from the University of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, who will discuss regionalization in a federal context.

Following their presentations, I shall try to draw some conclusions and recommendations.