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Morocco

# Moroccan Catastrophic Convergence

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**“We must accept to live African, it is the only way to live dignified and free.”** – Thomas Sankara, former President of Burkina Faso (1949-1987)

**“The Third World today faces Europe like a colossal mass whose project should be to try to resolve the problems to which Europe has not been able to find the answers.”** – Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

On October 28, 2016, in Al Hoceima – a city in northeastern Morocco – Mohsin Fikri lost his life after a state official threw his wares into a garbage truck. When the desperate vendor climbed into the truck to reclaim his fish, “a local police officer ordered the garbage truck driver to start the compactor and “grind him” according to activists and witnesses. The vendor was ground to death by the truck’s machinery.

The large protests that followed were reminiscent of the wave of mobilizations that Morocco witnessed in 2011, with the onset of the so-called Arab Spring. Activists in the streets denounced the hogra (arrogance and contempt of those in power) and expressed their sense of injustice.

The king offered cosmetic constitutional reforms. With this “concession” elites hoped the nominal Spring would pass, claiming a so-called Moroccan exception to the rule. This claim to stability was contradicted by major mobilizations following Fikri’s death in more than 40 cities.

As scholar Gilbert Achcar has noted: “We were only at the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process that will go on for years and decades. As in every such historical process, there will be ups and downs, revolutions and counter-revolutions, upsurges and backlashes.” [1]

## The Catastrophic Convergence

Any follower of the general scene in Morocco is dazzled by the stark contradictions in a tale of two Moroccos. There is a Morocco of mega projects: Tanger-MedPort, highways, high-speed trains (on the Train À Grande Vitesse), luxurious cars, villas, palaces and tourist resorts with large pools and vast golf courses.

But the contrasts to this apparent luxury are many. One finds a Morocco that ranks among the lowest on the human development index (HDI), vacillating between 126 and 130 out of 188 countries during the last years, 15th in the Arab world and 4th in the Maghreb region behind Libya, Algeria and Tunisia. One finds a Morocco in which one third of the people suffer from poverty and where the students spend only three or four years studying while the world average is around eight. Some women are forced to give birth shut out of hospitals while many others are deprived of basic health services.

With its adoption of the structural adjustment program in the early 1980s, Morocco relinquished its food sovereignty. Now vulnerable to price fluctuations in staple goods on global markets, it imports almost 50% of its wheat. People are also compelled to pay increasingly exorbitant electricity bills as Morocco has placed the fate of its energy in the hands of international and local private companies whose main interest is the insatiable accumulation of profits.

In his book *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, American author Christian Parenti elaborates on the concept of catastrophic convergence, which has devastated numerous regions worldwide. He means the catastrophic convergence of militarism, neoliberalism and climate change. The stark contradictions and injustice of today's Morocco, as with many countries in the region, reveal interwoven factors.

Morocco's three convergences constitute political despotism (the takeover by the elite around the king of almost all political and economic decisions), economic neoliberalism (neo-colonialism in tandem with privatization and export-oriented development), and the impacts of climate change (especially "extreme events" such as droughts and floods).

## The Crushing Machine of Political Despotism

During the second half of the '90s, with the preparation of the transition of power to the new King Mohammed VI, Morocco witnessed a slight improvement in political freedoms. The main factor that contributed to achieving those gains is the perseverance and sacrifice of generations of tireless Moroccan citizens and activists. Since the 1960s, they fought tooth and nail against the machinery of repression and intimidation imposed by the dictatorship of Hassan II, Mohammed VI's father.

But the relative improvement could not hide the persistent forms of political despotism, baptized "the new concept of authority." [2] Moreover, certain practices of the old era continued, such as kidnappings, investigations under torture and unjust charges, especially after the terrible suicide terrorist attacks in Casablanca on May 16, 2003.

In December 2010 in Tunisia, Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself, protesting the loss of his livelihood after police confiscated his produce because he had neither a permit nor the money to bribe them. His death sparked extraordinary uprisings in Tunisia, quickly spreading throughout North Africa.

This historic moment forced the authoritarian regime in Morocco to make tactical concessions in order to neutralize popular anger. The success of this approach manifested itself in the weakening and then the apparent demise of the February 20th Movement "as the Arab Spring was known in Morocco.

Many activists faced a state backlash including false accusations, groundless sentences, imprisonment, as well as being fired from their jobs. For instance Moad, a young rapper, also known as El-Haqed ("The Enraged"), considered the voice of the February 20th movement, has been arrested and jailed many times since 2012.

It is noteworthy that the backlash faced by the men and women protesting the regime is merely a small fraction of a wider backlash against the citizens following the demise of the February 20th Movement. The machinery of political despotism resumed suppressing all forms of protests organized by diverse segments of society to express their dismay and demand their rights. These included trainee teachers, medical students and Maghreb Steel's workers.

Renters' struggles to defend their right to decent housing against the greed of real estate developers (egregiously, Guich L'Oudaya and Ouled Sbita) were suppressed, and "illegal" houses, ignored by officials when they were constructed in poor neighborhoods, were demolished.

The dramatic death of Mohsin Fikri at the hands of a corrupt and oppressive system is proof that the machinery of political despotism remains, along with the task of uprooting it. Yet ongoing protests in the Northern cities also show

that the spirit of Abdelkrim Khattabi, a leader in the Rif region where Fikri was killed and an important anti-colonialist, still haunts Morocco's rulers as a symbol of struggle against all forms of colonialism and dependence.

## II. The Crushing Machine of Economic Liberalism and Privatization

With the despotic and nepotist leadership imposed since the fake independence of 1956, the liberal economic choices have been further narrowed as the structural adjustment program was implemented in the early 1980s. Since the privatization law in 1989 and the establishment of the Ministry of Economy and Privatization, the main decisions are dictated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

These include abandonment of public services (especially education and health), privatization of public facilities and institutions, an export-oriented economy (particularly agriculture), the opening of the Moroccan market to foreign products, and the decrease (or cancellation) of all subsidies to basic products (such as petrol, wheat, sugar, oil). These economic trends were deepened by ostensibly "free" trade agreements signed in the mid '90s.

In the 35 years following the diligent implementation of these neoliberal recipes, one can assert that they failed miserably even in their nominal goals, chief among them the control of the macroeconomic indexes and achievement of high economic growth rates. On the contrary, these trends had a catastrophic social impact, exacerbated our economic dependency and dealt a blow to what was left of our national sovereignty.

The fuels sector is a stark example. The closure and bankruptcy of the only refinery in Morocco, La Samir, and the displacement of its workers and their families was a devastating loss. Meanwhile, those who benefited from its privatization transferred their profits abroad, incurring a loss to the state of almost US\$5 billion.

Liberalization of oil prices, which was recently adopted in compliance with IMF dictates, allowed the fuels lobby to impose constant price increases despite a general decrease of oil prices in the global market.

It is noteworthy that the fuel prices' liberalization and the closure of La Samir Refinery allowed fuel companies, including Afriquia, owned by Aziz Akhannouch, the "long-standing" minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, to amass profits.

Akhannouch is the CEO of Akwa Group, a Moroccan conglomerate particularly active in the oil and gas sector. As of November 2013 Forbes estimated his net worth at \$1.4 billion. By 2016, he was ranked in the 28th position on Forbes's annual list of the world's wealthiest Arabs.

Akhannouch played a central role in the five-month deadlock around forming a new government in late 2016 and early 2017. Ongoing demonstrations denounce him for his alleged responsibility for the death of Mohsin Fikri; protesters call for his dismissal.

Morocco's ruling classes directly benefit from adopting neoliberal policies via the economic liberalization of public sectors and the privatization of state-owned companies in agro-industry (Cosumar and Régie des Tabacs), telecommunication and steel production. Through these privatizations, they have continued or even amplified the process of accumulation by dispossession initiated by colonizers before the fictitious independence. The majority of influential rich families in Morocco have benefited from the giveaway of profitable state companies and cost-effective public sectors.

Diana Davis of the Department of Geography and the Environment at the University of Texas explains that

“...neoliberalism has been enthusiastically, if selectively, embraced by the Moroccan monarchy and much of the business elite in contrast to the opposition it has encountered elsewhere.

“This is due, in part, to the fact that the royal family and its patrons have benefited enormously from certain aspects of neoliberal restructuring such as privatization. It is also due to some of the effects of neoliberalism that reinforce the government’s political goals. It has recently been argued, for example, that many neoliberal reforms have acted to depoliticize the public sphere in Morocco and thereby delayed the democratic reform of an authoritarian regime.” [3]

The rulers in Morocco have consistently pursued easy and lazy solutions by borrowing to service the financial debt caused by their misguided choices. Today, the public debt has reached record-high levels of almost US\$100 billion.

The Moroccan debt policy remains catastrophic, not only for using over one-third of the state budget to pay for debt services, but also for maintaining dependency through the conditions attached to loans.

Additionally, the lenders impose their preferences and projects with the collusion of the ruling elites. The French high-speed train project, the TGV between Casablanca and Tangier is a “good” example. The initial studies of the project were carried out by a French consultancy firm and sponsored by the French Development Agency (AFD) along with French and Gulf banks. French companies (Alstom and Railway) are the biggest beneficiaries of the project.

The majority of the Moroccan people, particularly the impoverished “most of whom have never set foot in any train, much less a high-speed one” will find themselves obliged to pay related debt service (including interest) at the expense of services they need, such as health and education.

### III. The Crushing Machine of Climate Change

Morocco is an example of climate injustice that characterizes the world nowadays. Morocco is one of the least polluting countries worldwide (less than 1.75 tons of CO2 per capita/year in 2013). Its responsibility for global climate change is insignificant.

Nevertheless, Morocco is simultaneously among the countries most affected by, and least prepared to cope with, the impact of climate change. The state’s retreat from the public sector and the shrinking of its resources due to the devastations of economic liberalism and privatization make the state unable to intervene to reduce repercussions of those terrible changes, notably extreme events such as floods and drought.

Anthropogenic climate change and its dire impacts on Morocco’s vital sectors especially agriculture are undeniable.

Increases in temperatures and lowering levels of rainfall as well as the recurring droughts (1980, 1985, 1991, 2006, 2015, 2016) and floods (Casablanca in 2010, Guelmim and Tiznit in 2014, Taroudant 2016, among others) are the main manifestations of climate disruptions in Morocco. The last World Bank report predicts future and more intense catastrophic impacts in our region if the highest-polluting countries do not drastically reduce their emissions. [4]

Although the elites acknowledge these changes, their economic choices and structural projects are in stark

contradiction to the necessity of addressing and coping with climate change. On the contrary, they are exacerbating them by compounding the pressure on natural resources. Here are just two examples.

The Azur Plan for tourism, in which the choice of sites on coastlines is problematic given the rise of sea levels and rising sea levels, presents a deep contrast between the lush swimming pools and golf courses on one hand and the dwindling water resources on the other (one-third decrease since the '60s). In fact the prediction is that Morocco will face absolute water scarcity by 2025 (less than 500 m<sup>3</sup>/year/capita).

The Green Morocco Plan argues the necessity to promote “high added-value” agricultural products in the global market. Yet the majority of these products (citrus, vegetables and fruits) are the most water consuming.

These three factors (political despotism, economic liberalism and climate change) overlap and converge, deepening and speeding up each other's negative effects.

## The Elites' “Environmentalism”

With the United Nations Climate Change Conference, converging with the Conference of the Parties (COP22) in Morocco, the ruling elites held the green banner and green-washed their companies, luxurious cars and speeches in order to win their guests' respect. They imposed decisions that claim to be environmental, but in fact only reflected an elite environmentalism in total opposition to the interests of the poor majority.

These decisions have deepened the conviction of this crushed majority that the laws are enforced against them, only exacerbating their suffering and humiliation. The most pertinent example is the zero-plastic bag campaign, which in fact targets plastic bags used by the poor while all forms of “first-class” plastic linked to big corporations' business were not banned.

This environmentalism is top-down, one which deems that the non-educated majority is responsible for ecological issues because they throw garbage in the streets and fail to maintain the beauty of public spaces. They perceive the ecological crisis as new opportunities for enrichment and accumulation of additional profit.

For that reason, they focus mainly on energy production projects owing to their high profitability via public-private partnerships (PPPs). This is a euphemism for privatizing profits and nationalizing losses, with citizens shouldering the responsibility of directly financing projects of energy production through hikes in electricity bills, or indirectly, through draining the state's finances.

On the contrary, private companies, including theirs and the ones of their French, Spanish, Emirati, and Saudi “partners,” benefit from advantages and preferential terms stated in tailor-made contracts.

## The Elites' “Nationalism”

The ruling elites do not hesitate whenever the opportunity arises to flaunt their nationalism. They do not hesitate to use it as a pretext against anyone who exposes their oppression and exploitation by in turn accusing them of being traitors to the nation and serving a foreign agenda.

They vaunt their patriotism even if they deposit most of their money abroad in Swiss, French and U.S. banks and other tax havens as it has been revealed recently by the Panama Papers. [5] They vaunt their patriotism while owning property and secondary residences in Europe and USA.

Furthermore, some of them consider their house abroad as primary while the Moroccan residence is considered as secondary, to be kept so long as it allows them to accumulate profits. They do not hesitate to show their second Western passports in order to escape from the bureaucratic, racist and degrading rules imposed by “rich” countries on Moroccans to get a visa.

Their nationalism is superficial and sporadic, embodied, for example, in busing poor people to the capital for marches. Their nationalism is in alliance with colonizers, old and new, in their mission to “re-conquer” Africa by appropriating its resources and controlling vital sectors such banks and energy, exactly as they did with our resources and vital sectors in the name of “Moroccanization.”

## Path of Hope: This Changes Everything

In her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Naomi Klein argued that the current catastrophic environmental crisis due to the globalized capitalist model of production, distribution and consumption is an opportunity to change everything. In fact, thanks to its catastrophic characteristic that even threatens life on Earth as we know it, this ecological crisis is a historic opportunity for emancipation and disposal of all forms of injustice and social disparities.

I adopt this motivational and hopeful view for Morocco. I believe that the catastrophic socio-economic as well as ecological situation, due to the three grinding machines of political despotism, economic liberalism and privatization, and climate change, could be a historic opportunity to change everything.

Radical change nowadays is not an option but a necessity owed to the majority of our people as well as to future generations. Any serious alternative societal project in Morocco cannot fail to consider those three crushing machines, nor their catastrophic and compound convergence.

Our alternative must start from our own culture and traditions and become reconciled with our identity. We must break with copy/paste solutions, conceived elsewhere and parachuted absurdly into our reality.

We have to break with the myth of modernity and the Orientalist view of development’s possibilities of our country. Our hopes and goals have to go beyond the development model adopted in France or the USA, if for no other reason than it is impossible ecologically to globalize this model.

We have to overstep our old and new colonizers so that “those lagging behind will become those at the fore,” as expressed by Frantz Fanon. We have to establish at the core of our alternative the complete sovereignty of local communities over their resources, including land, water, sun and minerals, which they could democratically manage for the common good.

All in all, the catastrophic convergence has to push us to urgently build a Morocco in which people have sovereignty over their resources and institutions. The latter have to be managed by the people to respond to the essential needs of the majority for food, education and health, in a way that respects ecosystems and their restorative capabilities.

## Moroccan Catastrophic Convergence

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[1] Gilbert Achcar, in an interview with Al Jazeera, January 28th 2016. "Q&A, The terrible illusion of the Arab Spring." <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/...>

[2] Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics and Society Under Mohammed VI, edited by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman & Daniel Zisenwine, Routledge, 2012.

[3] Davis, Diana K. "Neoliberalism, environmentalism, and agricultural restructuring in Morocco," *The Geographical Journal* 172, no. 2 (2006): 88-105. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4959.2006.00204.

[4] World Bank Group. 2014. Turn Down the Heat: Confronting the New Climate Normal. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org...>

[5] The Panama Papers lifted the lid on how some powerful people use tax loopholes to hide their wealth. Many Moroccan businessmen were cited by this unprecedented leak including Mounir Majidi, the personal secretary to King Mohammed VI since 2000. [See](#)