

The COVID-19 Crisis Can Be A Historic Opportunity for Morocco

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Over the past 20 years of self-imposed exile, I returned to Morocco sporadically to visit family and friends. Now, I am here indefinitely until the coronavirus pandemic passes. I have observed its effects upon my homeland as not just a proud Moroccan, but also a trained social scientist assessing how the Moroccan state has responded – and how new social dynamics can emerge from it.

Officially, Moroccan containment and mitigation measures have been described as a model of responsiveness. Notwithstanding testing shortages, and the failure to repatriate Moroccans abroad, new resources like personal protective equipment have been supplied to hospitals. Emergency funds are supporting the economy. The military and security forces have enforced strict quarantine and sheltering policies. Despite that infectious rates are among the highest in Africa, deaths from COVID-19 still remain comparatively low, a reality for which all Moroccans are grateful.

However, the aggressiveness of these responses stems from a troubling reality. The state moved quickly to contain the pandemic because it could not afford to do otherwise. It already lagged behind in providing basic goods like education and jobs, due to the unbridled neoliberal economic model espoused by national planners for two decades at the expense of social development. The healthcare sector could not absorb even a modest surge in hospitalizations and deaths. In sum, Morocco's response was optimal given its resources, but suboptimal given its potential.

Why is this troubling? Not only do medical projections suggest a second wave of the pandemic looms this winter, but there will be more existential threats to come of this type. Climate change will further accentuate these dangers. Further, entire swathes of the Moroccan economy will remain in crisis for the foreseeable future. Vast numbers of the labor force work in the informal sector, the product of unfettered neoliberalism that did not produce any trickle-down effects due to weak rule of law. Grinding inequality means that successful treatments for COVID-19 will not reach most of the population. As Moroccans, we need only to consider the Rif to acknowledge the dangers that lie ahead.

In the context of this crisis, many Moroccans have put aside standing grievances and put faith in their state. Politically, Moroccans do not labor under the extreme polarization often seen in other Arab countries. True, Morocco does not have the democratic system of Tunisia, where electoral institutions keep things in place. But, neither does it feature the deep schisms of Algeria, where the Hirak protest movement last year exposed the eroding legitimacy of the military and its civilian façade. If anything, Algerian politics will become even more fractured after the pandemic.

Morocco stands in the middle. Unlike Tunisia, where democratic institutions absorb and mediate this crisis, here the state can only deflect and postpone it. However, neither has Moroccan politics splintered across irreconcilable rifts, partly due to the unifying presence of the monarchy. This gives Moroccans the chance to envision a future of improved governance that compensates for past deficiencies, and leaves us better prepared for future threats. This is not a substitute for genuine pluralism, but it can facilitate its onset.

Recently, King Mohamed pronounced the prevailing paradigm of economic development to have floundered. As the Chinese proverb holds that with every crisis comes opportunity, we now have an opening to realign it, despite that more hardships will likely ensue as the pandemic continues to have long-lasting consequences. For instance, remittances, long a vital source of economic funding, will decline, as Moroccans abroad will more likely keep their cash close. The tourism sector will take many years to recover. But Morocco can also take advantage of global supply chain disruptions to secure new modes of production. Self-sufficiency and social spending must be priorities.

Crucially, we cannot merely tweak the neoliberal model in favor of a master turn-key monarchical plan. The focus here falls upon not just the ideas behind national development, but the process through which those ideas come to fruition. Major ruptures that allow such soul-searching are rare in Morocco. One came after the passing of my uncle, King Hassan II, in 1999. A second came with the Arab Spring in 2011. Today marks another such inflection point, which allows all of society sharing common trauma and frustration to step back from the brink.

That process will not be easy. Many Moroccans have lost faith in political engagement after too many failed reform promises. The Arab Spring's impetus to demand voice and dignity will become more omnipresent. New social and economic initiatives must be formulated in close concertation with society, through inclusive dialogues that favor participation over top-down imposition.

The state must avoid succumbing to the huge temptation of stoking false patriotism, or aggrandizing its authoritarian impulse by securitizing the pandemic. For instance, surveillance technologies utilized to ensure social distancing cannot be retooled to suppress political mobilization, as is happening in Russia and China. Indeed, many have wrongly assumed that autocracies are better equipped for the current crisis by comparing China with the US. However, this is a false dichotomy. For every China, there are successful democracies like South Korea and Taiwan where close state-society coordination is mediated not by the army or police, but rather by trust, transparency, and citizen engagement.

In short, an historical opportunity now presents itself for Morocco; let us not squander it.