

Research Application Summary

Exploring the determinants of Morocco's robust climate policy with the political economy approach

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Abstract

While the impacts of climate change are felt across the globe, the African continent is most vulnerable to them despite having least contributed to greenhouse gas emissions. The Maghreb in the northwest of Africa, which consist of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, is assessed as one of the most vulnerable areas due to intense warming, prolonged droughts, high dependence on the agricultural sector, population increase, and the lack of regional cohesion. Among these countries, Morocco has demonstrated that climate action is not a concern for the wealthy, but rather, an initiative that can complement growth within developing countries. According to the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) developed by Germanwatch in 2021, Morocco ranked 6th in the world in terms of climate policy. To what can Morocco's ambitious posture be attributed? Setting aside the more direct and tangible factors of climate policymaking such as the country's vulnerability to the issue, geographical features, technological capabilities, and finances to carry out climate initiatives, this study attempts to examine its more institutional roots. Upon conducting a macro-level qualitative analysis of Morocco's political and economic structure using the political economy approach, it became apparent that the government structure of Morocco—one that allows the monarch to exercise the power to set the agenda and override any major decision made by the government, is an important component of climate policymaking. Despite the lack of political accountability and unclear role of interest groups, both of which are deemed important by the model, Morocco has been able to set a robust climate policy framework. The study finds that Morocco's government structure, paired with its monarch's strong initiative to advance climate action, has been the most significant driving force in the Kingdom's climate policy initiative.

Key words: Climate change, climate policy, government structure, interest groups, Morocco, political accountability, political economy

Résumé

Alors que les impacts du changement climatique se font sentir dans le monde entier, le continent africain y est le plus vulnérable bien qu'il ait le moins contribué aux émissions de gaz à effet de serre. Le Maghreb au nord-ouest de l'Afrique, composé de l'Algérie, de la Libye, de la Mauritanie, du Maroc et de la Tunisie, est considéré comme l'une des zones les plus vulnérables en raison du

réchauffement intense, des sécheresses prolongées, de la forte dépendance au secteur agricole, de l'augmentation de la population et du manque de cohésion régionale. Parmi ces pays, le Maroc a démontré que l'action climatique n'est pas une préoccupation pour les riches, mais plutôt une initiative qui peut compléter la croissance dans les pays en développement. Selon le Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) développé par Germanwatch en 2021, le Maroc se classe au 6e rang mondial en matière de politique climatique. À quoi peut-on attribuer la posture ambitieuse du Maroc ? Laissant de côté les facteurs plus directs et tangibles de l'élaboration des politiques climatiques tels que la vulnérabilité du pays au problème, les caractéristiques géographiques, les capacités technologiques et les finances pour mener à bien les initiatives climatiques, cette étude tente d'examiner ses racines plus institutionnelles. Après avoir mené une analyse qualitative au niveau macro de la structure politique et économique du Maroc en utilisant l'approche de l'économie politique, il est devenu évident que la structure gouvernementale du Maroc, celle qui permet au monarque d'exercer le pouvoir de fixer l'ordre du jour et d'annuler toute décision majeure prise par le gouvernement, est un élément important de l'élaboration des politiques climatiques. Malgré le manque de responsabilité politique et le rôle peu clair des groupes d'intérêt, qui sont tous deux jugés importants par le modèle, le Maroc a été en mesure de mettre en place un cadre de politique climatique solide. L'étude révèle que la structure gouvernementale du Maroc, associée à la forte initiative de son monarque pour faire progresser l'action climatique, a été le moteur le plus important de l'initiative de politique climatique du Royaume.

Mots clés: Changement climatique, politique climatique, structure gouvernementale, groupes d'intérêts, Maroc, responsabilité politique, économie politique

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in global efforts to tackle climate change. The Paris Agreement, which came into effect in 2016, has placed the climate initiative as a vital agenda in the international community and has led to the mass mobilization of county-level policy revisions to meet ambitious but self-determined carbon reduction goals. Signatories to the Agreement are expected to comply with their nationally determined contributions (NDC) in the effort to keep global temperature increases to 1.5 degrees celsius. This target, set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is vital to the interests of all nations as there is a well-established understanding that climate change knows no territorial boundaries. It is particularly crucial, however, for certain regions that are more vulnerable to its impacts. The Maghreb in the northwest of Africa, which consist of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, is assessed as one of these highly vulnerable areas due to intense warming, prolonged droughts, high dependence on the agricultural sector, population increase, and the lack of regional cohesion (Tekken *et al.*, 2009; Schilling *et al.*, 2012; Nechad *et al.*, 2021). Bordering the Mediterranean, the Maghreb region is also susceptible to seawater intrusion, which exacerbates water security and agricultural productivity (Schilling *et al.*, 2012).

Climate action has been a contentious topic in international debates—with good reason—due to the fact that the countries most affected by climate change are also the ones least responsible for its acceleration. However, many developing countries have used this rationale as grounds for continued expansion of unsustainable practices that may make future transitioning even more difficult. A few exceptions, such as Morocco, have demonstrated that climate action is not a concern for the wealthy, but rather, an initiative that can complement growth within developing countries.

According to the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) developed by Germanwatch in 2021, Morocco ranked 6th in the world in terms of climate policy (Burck *et al.*, 2021). And despite the pandemic, Morocco has continued to increase its NDC and structure its policy around combating climate change by incorporating climate resilience in its most vital sectors, such as agriculture, to protect its existing resources and upscaling its climate financing initiative to discover new sustainable opportunities (UNFCCC, 2020; Brouziyne, 2021). To what can Morocco's ambitious posture be attributed? Setting aside the more direct and tangible factors of climate policymaking such as a country's vulnerability to the issue, geographical features, technological capabilities, and finances to carry out climate initiatives, this study attempts to examine its social roots by conducting a macro-level qualitative analysis of Morocco's political and socio-economic structure.

Theoretical Framework

The CCPI determines overall climate action performance by assessing four key categories: GHG emissions (40%), renewable energy (20%), energy use (20%), and climate policy (20%). While each category is a vital component of a country's climate mitigation posture, this study focuses on investigating the determinants of climate policy. Crafting a robust climate policy framework does not always result in proper implementation, but it serves as the foundation for optimal climate action, especially in its early stages (Burck *et al.*, 2021). This makes it equally important to focus on the policy input-side just as much as the output-side. The political economy approach will be utilized to analyze the determinants of Morocco's strong climate policy. Related literature on this model proposes several important factors to policymaking, which include international influences, government structure, political accountability, and interest groups (Steves and Teytelboym, 2013). Since this study is concerned with examining characteristics unique to Morocco, analysis on the influence of international institutions will be omitted.

First, government structure is an important subject of analysis because the type of institution has direct influence on the legislative process. Instead of categorizing political regimes as parliamentary or one-party, a more universal unit of measurement could be "veto players", a concept developed by George Tsebelis. He argues that political systems can be distinguished in the extent to which actors can use their veto power. Assuming that veto players may be divided on certain issues, the number of veto players would determine the levels of specificity and ambition of the policies (Tsebelis, 2002). Next, political accountability can be determined by the level of democratization, which manifests in electoral rules and freedom of press (Bättig and Bernauer, 2009). This affects policymaking as political actors in societies with greater accountability would be more sensitive towards public opinion. Finally, interest groups are said to be powerful actors in shaping policy. For instance, if carbon-intensive industries occupy a large share in any given country's economy, climate policy initiatives are likely to be more difficult to advance because of lobbying efforts from relevant interest groups (Gould *et al.*, 2008). A counterbalancing effect may occur if the scientific community and environmental associations have significance in society (Broadbent, 2016).

Analysis: The case of Morocco

Government Structure. Morocco's Government system is defined as 'a constitutional, democratic, parliamentary and social Monarchy' ("The Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco 2011," art 1). As stipulated by the constitution, the King is both 'spiritual leader' and 'Head of State'. In contrast

¹The Climate Change Performance Index is a monitoring tool that measures the climate action performance of 60 countries and the European Union. No country achieved a ranking of first to third on all categories (except renewable energy) as none are taking sufficient action to prevent the dangerous impacts of climate change

to parliamentary monarchies of the west, Morocco has a government structure and a national constitution that revolves around the king, who exercises the power to appoint and dismiss cabinet members, revise the constitution, set the legislative agenda, and override any decision made by the two Chambers of Parliament (Madani, 2012). The Council of Ministers, which is headed by the king, has veto power over the Council of Government, which is led by the Prime Minister (officially ‘Head of Government’). In other words, no decision can be imposed upon the monarch of Morocco, and his power is beyond symbolic significance in both the legislative and executive branches of government and constitutional life.

Having a governing institution that allows a strong central figure to retain agenda-setting power and veto power over all major decisions has some repercussions on political and individual freedom (Madani, 2012). However, such conditions allow for certain policy initiatives to be carried out with greater coordination and efficiency. Such is the case for climate change mitigation and adaptation in Morocco, where King Mohammed VI has instilled political will for the integration of climate action in its national development plans (MEMWE, 2014). Shortly after his accession to the Moroccan throne in 1999, Morocco took on a more active role in the global climate initiative. In its bid to boost its profile in the international community, Morocco hosted the COP7 and established its National Committee for Climate Change in 2001 (Machmany *et al.*, 2015; Fakir, 2021). Since then, Morocco has consistently called for increased NDCs and hosted more major climate change-related conferences. Its continued efforts demonstrate that environmental sustainability is a policy area that the Moroccan regime, under the leadership of the King, gives special emphasis (Nicolai, 2020).

Political Accountability. Following the 2011-2012 public protest for reform in Morocco, which was ignited by the Arab Spring in other North African countries, King Mohammed VI called for constitutional reform. The royal commission for constitutional reforms proceeded with adopting changes including the expanded role of the legislative branch and human rights that were not recognized in previous constitutions. One way of evaluating political accountability is by looking into how a nation chooses its leaders. Parliament is divided into two: the House of Representatives and the House of Counsellors. While the former is elected by universal popular vote, the latter is elected by regional electoral colleges (Parliament of Morocco). The 2011 reforms now require the King to appoint the Head of State from the political party that has acquired the most number of seats in the parliamentary elections. More recently, the King has implemented policies that increase pluralism by limiting the major parties’ ability to acquire a large number of seats. However, as mentioned in the previous section, the monarch remains the overarching institution for decision-making concerning critical areas to this day. This puts into question the degree of political accountability as the constitution does not hold the King accountable to any other institution (Madani, 2012).

In addition to Morocco’s electoral process, the level of independence of the media is another indicator for determining the degree of political accountability (Steves and Teytelboym, 2013). Freedom House, which evaluates Morocco as “partly free” with a Global Freedom Score of 37 out of 100, claims that Morocco’s media is dominated by the State and that independent press does not enjoy full freedom. Independent press can report on social and economic matters with little regulation, but there are clear limitations when it comes to topics that pertain to the royal family (Freedom House, 2020). Activists who post content that is deemed offensive to the monarchy are forced to operate anonymously in fear of prosecution. Freedom House adds that journalists

face regular government surveillance and detention. With this being said, the Head of State is rarely subject to open criticism, and therefore, faces little to no public accountability for any wrongdoings.

Interest Groups. If climate policy—like any other policy—was a game, political institutions would dictate the rules and interest groups would take on the role of the playing teams. Climate change response creates a quasi experiment where different social groups would react differently according to their interests (Broadbent, 2016). And because these “teams” will attempt to steer policy in the direction that best fits their objectives, determining their significance may provide some explanation as to why certain policies matter more than others in a given country.

Morocco, despite its efforts to develop a green reputation, is still highly dependent on coal and oil, which account for a combined 84 percent of total energy supply in 2018 (IRENA, 2021). The Kingdom still has a long way to go in terms of cutting emissions and transitioning to more renewable sources of energy, and resistance is expected from the energy sector, which accounts for 44 percent of Morocco’s total carbon emissions for 2019 (IEA, 2020). Despite this, Morocco has been able to carry out its fossil fuel subsidy phase-out plan from 2012 without facing strong opposition (World Research Institute, 2021). This is because the groups that were disadvantaged by the subsidies outnumbered the groups that were advantaged. Morocco, unlike other North African countries, imports a whopping 90 percent of its energy supply from foreign sources. Given Morocco’s low dependence on domestic fossil fuel production, which would be the main beneficiaries of the subsidies, the reform did not cause intense resistance from organized groups. Instead, the reforms were welcomed by more groups as 6.6 percent of Morocco’s GDP was now being diverted to other areas including clean energy and social welfare (Gass and Echeverria, 2017). This also benefited labor groups as new mass-scale renewable energy projects such as “Nour Complex” and “Plan Vert”, are projected to create up to 500,000 jobs by 2040 (García and Leidreiter, 2016). While profit-based entities are usually the primary forces in frustrating greenhouse gas reductions and other forms of climate response, most high-profile advocates of climate action are from civil society. Following the Rio Summit in 1992, which was a milestone in the climate initiative, there has been an increase in environmental NGOs and a wider acceptance of the science community (World Environmental Education Congress, 2013). However, there is little evidence that civil society has a significant role in Morocco’s climate policy initiatives. Related literature consistently suggests that the public has had little involvement in the government’s top-down climate plans (Bouknicht, 2019; Van Praag *et al.*, 2021). In fact, Afrobarometer suggests that only 29 percent of Moroccans have ample knowledge regarding the negative impacts of climate change (Selormey *et al.*, 2019). Youth activism seems to be mobilizing around environmental matters as of recent, but even then, the climate crisis is considered secondary to more immediate concerns like unemployment, which affects around 22 percent of the youth (Bouknicht, 2019).

Discussion

Going back to the political economy model, which serves as this study’s framework for evaluating the determinants of policy input, the following outcomes can be expected: a centralized government structure (with less veto players), high political accountability, and support from influential interest groups positively affect policy inputs. While such an observation seems intuitive, an analysis of Morocco’s institutions suggests that not all of these factors are necessary for developing robust climate policy.

Morocco's constitutional architecture allows for the government, especially the legislative and executive branches, to be subject to the monarch's power. His ability to use his veto power to override any decision made by the legislative chambers demonstrates that the king's agenda is the Moroccan Government's agenda. This clearly supports the political economy model's first assumption that a centralized government is more suitable for ambitious policy initiatives. Its second assumption, however, contradicts the realities of Morocco. Despite the apparent lack of political accountability, which is manifested in the electoral process and freedom of press, Morocco is able to produce and implement climate policies that are both ambitious and feasible. And as for the third assumption, regarding the important role of interest groups, it is unclear whether Moroccan interest groups have had an impact in climate policymaking. While strong resistance is not expressed, it is also difficult to observe strong advocacy from civil society.

The most prominent source of Morocco's ambitious climate policies is the monarch's strong initiative to advance climate action. Despite the lack of political accountability and undetermined role of interest groups, King Mohammed VI's campaign for Moroccan leadership in climate action has been sufficient in propelling Morocco's climate policy way ahead of its neighbors. Surely, there are other socioeconomic factors that simultaneously contribute to this phenomenon. However, there is sufficient reason to believe that the role of the monarch has been most vital. In fact, this is not the first time that a Moroccan king used his political influence to carry out a challenging policy reform. The late King Hassan II, who preceded King Mohammed VI, was instrumental in Morocco's trade liberalization process in the 1980s. Despite facing strong opposition from relevant parties and interest groups, the late king had successfully presided over the translation of liberal trade practices into national laws that are compatible with international agreements (Cherkaoui, 2007). Aside from the wide range of the monarch's power, continuity can be one of the positive forces of effective policy reform. Free from electoral pressures and the constraints of limited terms, Morocco's monarch is in a more optimal position to take on long-term projects that require consistency and determination. It is no surprise, then, that Morocco's rise as a climate leader coincides with King Mohammed's rise to the throne, a time that introduced environmental preservation as a one of the major tenets of the kingdom's policy.

Conclusion

Contrary to the assumptions of the political economic model, Morocco has achieved ambitious climate policy inputs despite the lack of political accountability and unclear linkage between interest groups and climate policy advancement. This is largely because climate action is in the interest of the Moroccan monarch, who can—at his discretion—exercise the power to set the agenda and override any major decision made by the government. While this brings about positive impacts on the global climate initiative, it has undesirable domestic effects that are characteristic to nondemocratic countries. The lack of political accountability, brought on by the absence of the universal right to choose the Head of State and the lack of media freedom, paired with the monarch's unchallenged power does not provide an environment conducive to social development. A task for Morocco would be to ensure that a strong posture on climate change is complemented by increased social safety nets for those who are left behind in the energy transition. The positive impact of civil society on development is well established, so increasing collaboration between civil society and the already eager government would produce even better results for Morocco's climate performance by accelerating the execution of action plans. These lessons are highly relevant not only to Morocco but other countries in Africa. Conditions are likely to get worse

before they get better, so the need for strong leadership in the area of climate action is urgent. Emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, only exacerbate difficulties in responding and adapting to climate change, so coordination between African States is highly necessary. Perhaps the next stage of this study may be to explore ways Morocco can take a more active role in the Maghreb, where regional cohesion is largely absent, or in continental Africa, to promote climate cooperation and collective development.

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