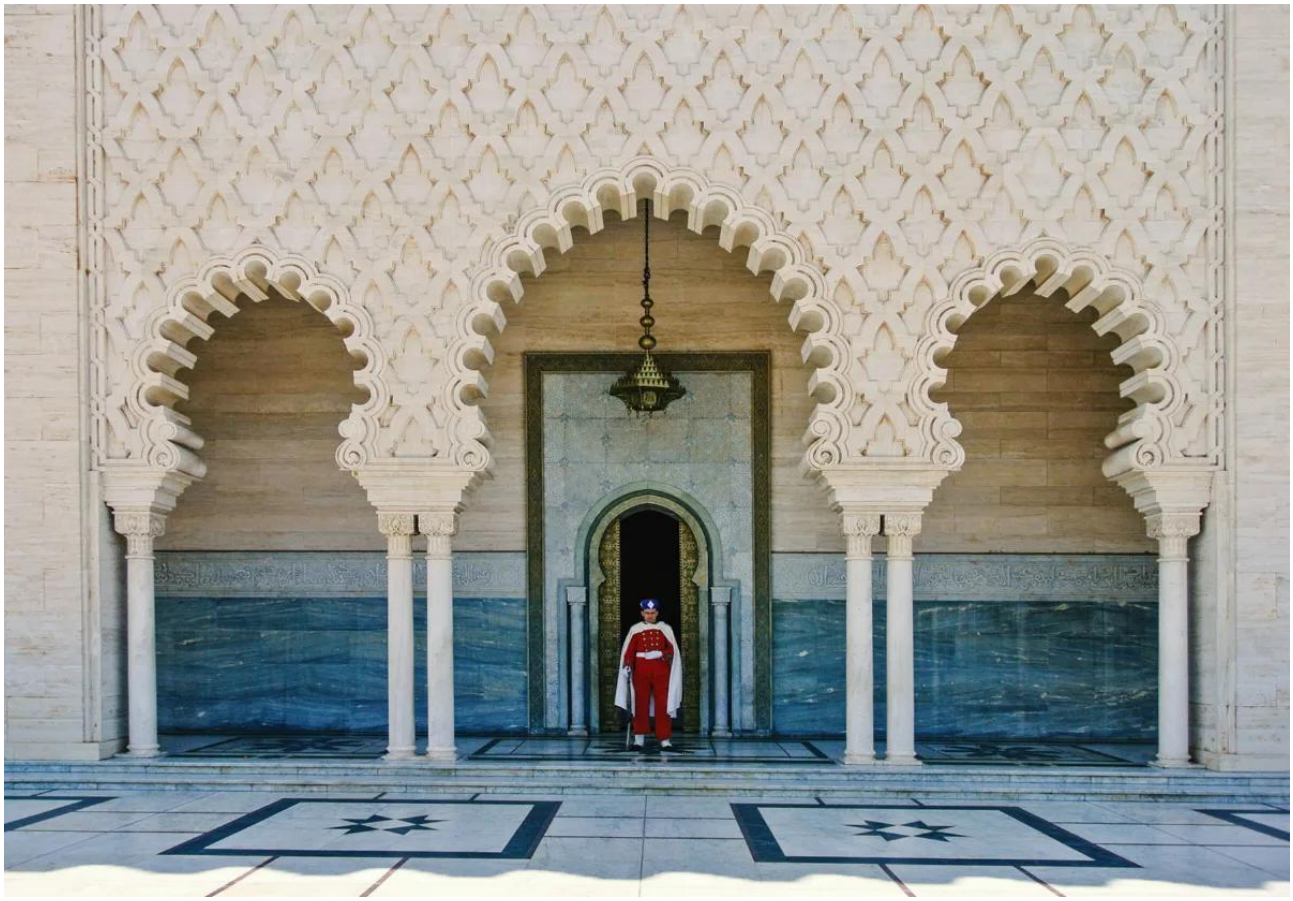


Morocco: A King’s Journey — A Quarter Century of Royal Leadership and National Transformation

By Omar Khattaly · 2 July 2025

During my childhood in Morocco in the 1980s, the kingdom’s emblem — symbolizing God, the nation, and the king — was a permanent fixture on the hills of most major cities. This emblem formed the foundation upon which the monarchy drew its authority and popular support. In 2025, as I reflect on the country’s transformation into a stable and prominent state, despite its limited resources and ongoing socioeconomic challenges, I think back to that emblem. It was a symbol that a young king in his thirties chose to embody upon ascending the throne, continuing a dynasty that traces its roots back to the 1600s.

In 1999, following the reign of King Hassan II and the ascension of his son, King Mohammed VI, Morocco underwent significant transformations. From the outset of his reign, King Mohammed VI sought to modernize the nation, appointing a

government that reflected renewal and change, composed of highly educated and trained individuals from prominent universities and corporations in the United States and Europe. This initiative reflects a deliberate policy to infuse the kingdom with fresh ideas and expertise, marking a departure from the past. Has the approach succeeded?

The following outlines Morocco’s socio-economic and political transformation over the past quarter-century, culminating in its present state.

In 2000, the kingdom reported a 1.6% annual GDP growth rate, with a GDP of $37 billion, exports of only $8 billion, and an unemployment rate exceeding 15%. The king aspired to a paradigm shift in the kingdom's economic structure, encompassing a transformation in its infrastructure, including roads, ports, manufacturing, and technology. At the time, its ports and railway infrastructure were showing their age and required significant expansion and modernization.

Projections indicate that by 2025, the kingdom will experience an economic expansion, with an anticipated GDP growth of 4.1%, reaching a value of $157 billion. This represents a substantial increase from the year 2000, when the GDP stood at $37 billion. The kingdom's exports are expected to exceed $45.5 billion, a significant surge from the previous figures of the year 2000 at $8 billion, reflecting a diverse and thriving export sector. Notably, the middle class increased from 53% of the population in 2012 to 62% in 2019.

With a rise in incomes comes a better standard of life and health. According to the United Nations, the average life expectancy increased from 66 to 75 years between 1998 and 2023, and the absolute poverty rate decreased from 15.3 percent in 2001 to 1.7 percent in 2019. While many neighboring countries with greater resources experienced stagnation and a lack of development, the kingdom continued to make progress toward modernity and economic growth.

Much of the kingdom’s success is attributed to the king’s wisdom in launching political, economic, and social reform agendas with a focus on lifting his people out of poverty and into sustainable stability in the 21st century. Since 2000, over 15 major initiatives across 5 major sectors affecting Moroccan lives have been introduced and implemented with high success. These strategic programs and visions had direct effects of taking the kingdom and its people to a spot in the emerging economies club.

Let us briefly examine some of these transformative programs and initiatives. According to a Moroccan colleague, their success can be largely attributed to the King’s direct involvement, as he has worked relentlessly to facilitate their

implementation and closely monitored their progress from inception to completion.

First, the Emergence Plan, launched in the early 2000s, aimed to facilitate a structural transformation of the economy by transitioning away from traditional sectors, such as agriculture, toward greater modernization and diversification. This strategy was designed to foster the development of high-value-added industries that could generate well-compensated employment opportunities and attract additional foreign investment. The sectors of focus included automotive manufacturing, aerospace, defense, green technologies, electronics, and textiles. Furthermore, in order to support and sustain this transformation, the plan placed significant emphasis on the expansion of infrastructure, including industrial zones and logistics hubs.

At present, Morocco's automotive industry stands as the leading sector in Africa and the Middle East, with annual vehicle exports exceeding 700,000 units, mainly produced by international brands such as Renault Group and Stellantis. A major automotive and logistics hub has been established in the Tangier Free Zone, while a second manufacturing facility was constructed in the Kenitra Atlantic Free Zone.

In the aerospace industry, the Casablanca Midparc was established as a key hub, attracting leading firms such as Boeing, Airbus, and Bombardier, which have subsequently established assembly, repair, and maintenance facilities within the country. At present, more than 140 aerospace companies are operational in Morocco, reflecting the sector's ongoing expansion and growing strategic significance.

The Technopark Casablanca was built with a focus on IT and innovation to grow and support the electronics and semiconductors industry. At the moment, Morocco's exports of Medium-tech products far exceed those of regional competitors such as Tunisia and Egypt.

To build upon the success of the automotive and aviation industries — which collectively generate over US$16 billion in annual foreign currency earnings and employ hundreds of thousands of workers — the Kingdom in 2020 launched a defensive weapons manufacturing program. This initiative is designed to attract major international firms to invest in two specialized military-industrial zones, with the objective of manufacturing light weapons, military vehicles, ammunition, and military communications equipment. As an investment incentive, the government offered a five-year tax credit to participating companies and allocated US$13.20 billion in its 2025–2029 budget to provide the necessary infrastructure to enable the implementation of this ambitious plan. The principal goals of the strategy are to increase exports to growing African markets and reduce the Kingdom's annual military expenditures, which recently fell by 2.5% to US$5.2 billion

To further consolidate and advance the Plan Émergence, the King introduced a two-phase Industrial Acceleration Plan (2014–2020 and 2021–2025) alongside the New Development Model (2021), which extends through 2035. The Industrial Acceleration Plan aims to strengthen the country's industrial sector by focusing on the following strategic priorities:

- Enhancing Industrial integration.
- reducing dependency on imports while boosting exports.
- Promoting Research & Development.
- Increasing foreign direct investment.
- Expanding access to European & African markets for Moroccan products.
- Train local talents for higher-wage Industrial positions.

Overall, the plan is designed to position Morocco as a regional Industrial hub in key industries such as pharmaceuticals, aerospace, automotive, green energy, and others.

The New Development Model (NDM) of Morocco (2021)

A strategic road map commissioned by the king to address and transform the country's social and Economic structural challenges by 2035. This roadmap focuses on the following:

- Fostering Innovation and Growth in high-value-added industries.
- Promote and strengthen the private sector.
- Investing in human capital through educational and vocational training.
- Social protection programs such as universal healthcare, pensions, and unemployment benefits, and Gender equality.
- developing rural areas through enhanced infrastructure.
- Adopting Business-friendly legislation and regulations.
- Decentralization of government decision-making through empowering local and regional governments.

The program aims to build sustainable GDP, create high-quality jobs, and enhance quality of life through improved education, health services, and infrastructure by 2035.

Export-driven economic growth requires efficient infrastructure, particularly modern

highways and ports. In 2000, there were only 300 km of highways connecting Casablanca—Rabat, and Kenitra, with a small stretch to the city of Fez. By the year 2020, Morocco's highway network reached 1800 kilometers, with a plan to increase it to 3000 kilometers by the year 2030, connecting all major cities and boosting economic growth.

As a direct result of these initiatives, it is estimated that these industrial projects contribute to 25% of the kingdom's GDP and have created over 500,000 highly skilled and good-paying jobs across many of these industries, including solar panel and wind turbine manufacturing, such as Noor Ouarzazate, one of the world's largest solar plants.

Digital Morocco 2030 was launched in September 2024 to further solidify the Kingdom's technological foundation, transform the country into a leader in digital infrastructure in Africa, and create jobs by 2030. The strategy is to create 240,000 jobs by 2030 and train over 100,000 young Moroccans annually in digital professions to modernize government agencies and digitize 600 public services to improve accessibility and efficiency.

Key goals of this initiative include increasing 5G coverage and Fiber optics to the majority of the population and creating national sovereign cloud services to ensure high data security for the public and private sectors. The cornerstone of this strategy is nationwide education and training programs, especially in AI technology. An AI training school was set up in the city of Taroudant, and other programs are in schools in Beni Mellal and, soon, in Nador.

International companies such as Nokia, KPMG, and Oracle have signed agreements to work with Morocco on Digital 2030. Oracle has committed to an investment of $140 million over five years and the set-up of two data centers that will transfer high-tech training and knowledge to the Moroccan youth.

On Agriculture and food security, one of the most pressing challenges facing the Kingdom is the increasing frequency and severity of droughts, which pose a significant threat to national food security and water availability. In response, the Kingdom has initiated the National Water Management Plan (2020–2050), a long-term strategic framework aimed at mitigating water scarcity through the expansion of seawater desalination infrastructure. The plan targets a substantial increase in desalination capacity—from the current level of 192 million cubic meters per year to an anticipated 1.7 billion cubic meters annually by 2030.

At present, the government oversees the operation of 15 desalination facilities distributed across the country. Among these efforts, the most ambitious project

underway is the construction of the largest desalination plant on the African continent, located in Casablanca. This facility is designed to produce 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water annually, with planned expansion to 300 million cubic meters by the year 2028. This initiative reflects the Kingdom’s strategic commitment to sustainable water resource management and long-term climate resilience.

Sustainable economic development cannot be achieved in the absence of social and human advancement. Recognizing this inextricable relationship, the King of Morocco launched two landmark initiatives that have served as foundational pillars for the country’s societal progress.

In 2005, the Kingdom introduced the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a comprehensive program aimed at enhancing public health and social services, reducing poverty, and expanding access to quality education. As part of this initiative, increased funding was allocated to improve the infrastructure and quality of schools, universities, and healthcare facilities across the kingdom.

Complementing this effort, the Moudawana, or Family Code Reform, was introduced in 2004 to strengthen women's rights in matters of marriage, divorce, and child custody. This legal reform sought to promote gender equity and reinforce the protection of family structures, marking a significant step toward women's empowerment and advancing human rights in Morocco.

During the past century, Morocco's political stability has been tested through a challenging journey and critical turning points filled with difficulties. The most recent challenge occurred in 2011, during the Arab Spring movements that swept across the region. Morocco experienced street protests fueled by public anger and demands for political change, social justice, increased democracy, and an end to corruption. Unlike other countries in the region that responded with violence and repression, Morocco took a different approach. The king addressed the demands of the February 20 movement by implementing a series of political and constitutional reforms, which included the following:

- More powers to the executive government by having the party that wins the elections appoint the prime minister with the power to appoint and dismiss ministers and dismiss them at his/her discretion.
- A decentralized governance structure empowering regional and city governments.
- Establishing the High Council of Judicial Power, leading to less control of the royal office over judges.

- An expansion of Civic and Human rights with more Gender equality, freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and the right to assemble for peaceful protest and due process.
- The recognition of the Amazigh language, spoken by 60% of the population, as the kingdom's official language, along with Arabic which is considered a major win for the strong and influential Amazigh movement in the country.
- More Parliamentary powers to pass legislation and ratify treaties.
- The creation of the National Authority for Probity, Prevention, and the Fight Against Corruption as an independent body to lead the fight against corruption.

The kingdom's Political reforms, along with human rights and social advancement programs, paved the way for a higher degree of social justice, income equality, and political stability, which are the cornerstones of economic development and foreign direct investment in any part of the world.

What, then, does this imply for Morocco's future, and in which direction might it proceed after a quarter-century of well-structured growth under a stable and farsighted monarchy? Despite some lingering issues with youth employment, rural area poverty, and consistent drought, today's Morocco — with its young, educated, and dynamic population — is poised to occupy a leading position as a preferred investment destination within Africa. Furthermore, due to its geographic location, international companies looking to pursue global expansion should view this as a significant opportunity to gain a foothold in both the African and European markets.

Morocco's social, political, and economic stability positions it as a prime destination for multinational companies seeking robust growth prospects and opportunities for market expansion. Countries working to establish effective institutions and develop resilient economies at the regional level can look to Morocco's decades of experience and proven strategies as a valuable framework for shaping their development trajectories.

Morocco's profound transformation over the past quarter-century under the leadership of King Mohammed VI offers a valuable example for nations striving to build a stable and cohesive state. The progress achieved during this period stands as a source of pride for the Moroccan people and a model of development worthy of reflection and study, especially for countries such as Libya.

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