



African Diaspora Forum

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African Diaspora Forum (ADF) /Moroccan Association of South Africa(MASA) Round table Breakfast discussion on Morocco's return to African Union; Morocco's process to integrate ECOWAS and its bilateral trade agreements with fellow African countries

The African Diaspora Forum (ADF) and the Moroccan Association in South Africa (MASA) jointly held a round-table breakfast discussion on the advantages and challenges of Morocco's imminent return to the African Union and its integration to ECOWAS.

The discussion, which attracted dozens of experts, diplomats, journalists, migrant leaders, scholars, analysts and Africans at large in Mayfair on 26th December 2017, also looked at Morocco's bilateral trade agreements with fellow African countries.

The roundtable was part of a series of events that the ADF is running to help its members understand meaningful events shaping the African continent, giving a platform for various African countries to expose and present their policies and politics to a Pan-African audience.

The panellists included Mr Koffi Kouakou, a consultant and a former lecturer at Wits School of Governance at Wits University; Othman Mouane, a PhD student at Wits University, Mr Salman Khan, President of South African Foreigner Trade Union, Marc Gbaffou, Chairperson of the African Diaspora Forum (ADF) and Mr Ahmed Habiballah, the Chairman of MASA. Also invited was the Moroccan embassy in South Africa, represented by Mr. Abdelkader NAJI Charge d'Affaires, who came as an observer at the roundtable at the insistence of the civil society leaders.

The productive and informative gathering and indeed the discussions were centred on Morocco and its recent return to the African Union (AU) after 33 years of absence, as well as its process of integrating the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Verbally showcased were the roles that Morocco is playing and intends to play – bilaterally with fellow individual African countries and in the broader regional and continental groupings like ECOWAS and the AU in the 21st century.

The analysts also visited the model Morocco sets up in terms of integrating African migrants and gave nuanced and complex historical insights into the burning issue of the Western Saharan conflict that had limited the Moroccan role in Africa for decades. The discussion was lively, people were not shy to ask difficult questions to the panelists, organisers and Embassy representative, and the conversation was deep, constructive and insightful.

Catching the memories of the participants was the historical facts of tight relationships that have always existed between the African countries and Morocco, which showed that the North African country's return to the AU was necessary and evident, due to the importance that Africa represents to Morocco, and the importance of Morocco to Africa.

In his presentation, Mr Ahmed Habiballah revisited a study prepared by a special committee within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which noted the benefits of Morocco's admission – unanimously endorsed by heads of state, to the economic

community of the regional grouping, albeit adding that the question of the Sahara conflict had potential to somehow create division among the member states. ECOWAS however, pledged to think about how to manage the conflict.

Of special mention was the economic benefits of adding Morocco, which would increase investments in the region, facilitate the free movement of people and property, the right of residence, the single currency, the Common Foreign Tariff and the technical aspects of the relations between Morocco and ECOWAS member states, which would however, require a transitional period for a successful process.

On political, peace and security issues, the study noted that Morocco's military capabilities, equipment and economic achievements would be an added value to promote the peace, security and stability in the region, particularly in peacekeeping operations, combating terrorism, violent extremism, maritime security and conflict resolution mediation.

Morocco's economy could enhance macro-economic stability of ECOWAS and support economic convergence among its 15 countries. In 2016, more than 37 per cent of Moroccan exports went to ECOWAS countries, making it the main destination on the continent.

Morocco imports mainly fuel from the ECOWAS countries, with above 55 per cent of its imports from this group, 27 percent manufactured goods and 15.4 per cent food products. The imports came mainly from Nigeria, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Senegal.

Morocco itself exports manufactured products, fertilizers, building materials, paper, machinery, pharmaceutical products, packaging materials and footwear, especially Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal and Nigeria.

Described as an important investor, Morocco's addition to the ECOWAS bloc will attract more investment. In 2015, the flow of Moroccan direct investments in the bloc amounted to a total of 153 million dollars. Between 2010 and 2014, Morocco's direct investment doubled in the ECOWAS countries, moving from \$492 million to \$976 million. The investments' importance remains in finance and telecommunications, with three Moroccan banks operating in at least seven countries in the group and telecommunications branches in six countries.

"Even when the kingdom of Morocco was not part of the AU, the relations with sub-Saharan countries were still existing and these countries were able to count on the support of the kingdom of Morocco, which created a strong bilateral relations between these countries and Morocco," noted Mouane in his presentation, giving examples of the period from 2000, in which Morocco concluded 949 contracts in different public and private sectors with fellow African countries under the support of His Majesty, Mohamed VI, the king of Morocco.

In recent years, the king of Morocco made 46 visits to 25 countries, signing a coterie of accords, some of which gave priority to the high education of the youth - offering a million scholarships for African students to continue their studies in Moroccan universities.

Among some signed strategic projects expected to have a big impact on Africa is a regional gas pipeline project that will connect Nigeria's gas resources, those of several West African countries and Morocco. The project aimed at the creation of a competitive regional electricity market, with potential to be connected to the European energy market.

Nigeria and the Kingdom of Morocco also agreed to develop integrated industrial clusters in the sub-region in sectors such as manufacturing, Agro-business and fertilizers to attract foreign capital and improve export competitiveness.

Other investments include a deal between Ethiopia and Morocco's OCP (the world's larger phosphate exporter) of building a plant for producing fertilizers at a cost expected to reach \$3.7 billion, an agreement with Rwanda to build a blending unit and with Nigeria in agro-business and fertilizers. The Nigerian project important for the whole of Africa in enhancing the productivity of agriculture, development of rural areas, and addressing the niggling problem of food security.

“As it is known, it’s not the gas or the oil which will help to satisfy the need of Africa in the basic alimentary, the main challenge of the African continent is the food security. So, for the triple A initiative, which is just ‘Adaptation of African agriculture’ was the main focus on the COP22 which took place in Marrakesh in 2016,” added Mouane.

“The triple A initiative seeks to help the African agriculture and reduce its vulnerability to climate change. The triple A initiative promotes and fosters the implementation of concrete projects to improve soil management, agricultural water control, climate risk management, and capacity of building and funding solutions. This initiative is seen by politicians, scientists, academics, and representatives from international organizations as an opportunity for Africa to take the lead in integrating agriculture adaptation in its climate change strategy, and also a good response to food insecurity. (the comments from the cop 22 taken in Marrakesh).”

Morocco was part of peacekeeping and security, and participated in keeping the stability of the African continent, with its troupes forming part of six UN operations. Mouane said it was very clear and evident that Morocco was interested in getting involved in the south-south cooperation, adding the country’s choice to integrate the AU was for sharing and transmitting the expertise gained during the last years in many sectors with the rest of the African countries and propose to be part in building a bright and united future for all Africa.

Analysts praised Morocco’s involvement in joining the AU to contribute to developing the right environment for the African citizens by investing in the youth, who remain the main potential of Africa. During past few years, and without any natural resources, Morocco was able to attract international investors, and keeping a stable economy, knowing the situation in the area, this means the integration of Morocco will bring solutions but not only resources.

Mr Khan, chairman of the Pakistani Community in South Africa celebrated Morocco’s change of mind-set to return to the AU, giving it the “coming back home” analogue, as both the continent and Morocco would do more together, but warned the continent’s prospects lay more on the existence of political will to complement its vast resources. He said a strong Morocco was Africa’s gateway to the North, thereby giving it better prospects. He described Morocco as the gastronomic capital of Africa, forming a quartet of African economic alongside South Africa in the south, Nigeria in the west and Kenya in the East. Morocco also had potential to unlock the landlocked-ness of Africa and facilitate export routes upwards.

Mr Koffi Kouakou focussed on diplomatic rapprochement between Morocco and South Africa, following Morocco’s decision to leave the AU in 1984, based on the UN resolutions on the Western Sahara. He said Morocco’s rapprochement showed that Morocco understood the Africa first strategy, that there was no Morocco without Africa, adding that Morocco’s latest decision was an existential issue, as strategically, the country could not live without Africa, as it had been kept at the arm’s length from the European Union.

He described Morocco’s African Union membership as a “natural fit” for strategic and existential reasons, adding the new Moroccan King and his advisors had realised this was a much more natural thing to do. Mr Kouakou added it was also a realistic issue for Morocco to get back to the AU, where 72 per cent of member states voted for its return. He also noted the need for extensive lobbying for Morocco to establish itself in the continent with ECOWAS, AU and bilateral relations. He noted the three elements of the Moroccan strategy – globally, bilaterally and regionally.

He noted that the diplomatic rapprochement has challenges though – value-based and liberation struggle arguments based on the Western Sahara issue, but noted Morocco was doing very well, moving strategically, cautiously and effectively to win over fellow African countries. He noted recent event in Abidjan during the EU/AU Summit during which South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma’s announcement that Morocco and South Africa would soon open up bilateral relations. This was after Zuma met the Moroccan King.

The other challenge is the fragmented and fractured state of South Africa's ruling African National Congress, leading to many within it not knowing what Morocco is all about and seeing it as a far distant place culturally and location wise. There are no direct flights between Rabat and Johannesburg.

However, the opportunities are there and aplenty, with Morocco having 14 million tourists a year and looking to raise that to about 20 more million in 2020. Morocco is also advancing fast with huge investments and opportunities, emerging as an economic power in the continent.

Besides the challenges of the ideological issue about the Western Sahara, more and more African countries were being more pragmatic in terms of the realism, with emphasis being put more on the African Union more than the "African disunion" – how to keep the union together rather than having a fragmentation, giving a strong case for Morocco to make.

Mr Kouakou said Africa had a challenge to resolve the Sahara issue, adding whenever there is a family issue, it needed to be resolved, although the means to resolve is what divides people. He emphasised that trade and bringing people together would help resolve the differences.

The ADF said it was impressed to see that countries like Morocco are taking the plight of Africans seriously: investing in other African countries, offering numerous bursaries to African students of all languages and origins to study in Morocco, facilitating the integration of African migrants who arrive and settle in Morocco. Sub-Saharan Africans still have a lot to learn about this fellow African country.

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