

Think Tanks as Strategic Decision-Support Systems in North African Public Policy: Case of Morocco

Os *think tanks* como sistemas estratégicos de apoio à decisão nas políticas públicas do Norte de África: O caso de Marrocos

Hamza Aboudou,

FLSHJ, Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida Morocco
(aboudou.h052@ucd.ac.ma)

Abstract:

The Arab uprisings in North Africa have forced the states to survive in an environment characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (the VUCA paradigm). These changes massively affected the centralized governance models that relied on top-down intuition and failed to manage these intersecting crises without an institutionalized capacity for foresight.

Through this article, the ontological shift of policy institutes in the North African region is being examined, considering that think tanks are evolving from the traditional “idea factories” into institutionalized “strategic decision-support systems.”

By taking Morocco as a primary case study, the analyse is focusing on the institutional architecture of elite think tanks (such as IRES and PCNS) and the role they play as cognitive nervous system of the state, filtering informational noise to optimize public decision making and guarantee stability.

Conversely, a significant imbalance of influence is revealed in this research, although the state does take into consideration the macro-level foresights produced by elite institutions, the evidence based policy recommendations generated by grassroots civil society and youth organizations are being disregarded. This article posits that for an evidence based policymaking that understands the realities on the ground and that foster territorial resilience, the state must democratize its cognitive processes, thereby connecting sovereign strategy with local governance.

Keywords: Think Tanks, Public Policy, North Africa, VUCA Paradigm, Evidence-Based Policymaking, Civil Society, Strategic Foresight

Introduction

The political, economic, and social context of North Africa in the post-2011 era is one of unparalleled complexity and historical reconfiguration. Since the uprisings that toppled the region's authoritarian regimes, these states have had to function in an environment that organizational studies term the VUCA paradigm - Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Volatility manifests in the periodic socioeconomic crises that beset these states; uncertainty in the inherently unpredictable nature of political transition; complexity in interconnected issues like climate change, migration, and security; and ambiguity in trying to discern the intentions of various geopolitical actors in the region.

Confronted with such a tempest, an existential problem emerges regarding state structures: How will states manage the transition from crisis and develop state robustness in the absence of an institutionalized capacity for thinking ahead?

The traditional form of governance in the region was based on centralized leadership concepts in which decisions from the sovereign level were inspired by the intuition of the head of state or his inner circle, often detached from reality (Heydemann, 2007). The challenge posed by the approaching VUCA world calls for an antidote in the form of critical thinking, transparency, and the integration of different forms of knowledge to achieve the highest possible predictive power for public policies.

While the transition to evidence-based policy-making throughout the wider Middle East and North African region is ultimately a wildly inconsistent process, the Kingdom of Morocco represents a particularly compelling paradigm of this shift. Although regional discourse is dominated by the importance of technocratic rationality, in practice, the integration of evidence into policy-making is often hindered by endemic bureaucratic resistance (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2015).

Nevertheless, in the context of Morocco, there has been a notable development in the proliferation of think tanks in recent years. The question, therefore, arises as to whether these think tanks are filling an important functional need in policy-making, or simply acting as a form of elaborate diplomatic window-dressing intended to retrospectively legitimate policy decisions that have already been taken.

The involvement of international donors adds an additional dimension to this complexity. International financial organizations provide 'ideas aid', enabling them to indirectly affect the agenda of the policy-making process by imposing conditionality in the macroeconomic sphere (Stone, 2013).

The fundamental thesis of this article is that the ontological shift in Moroccan think tanks is an undeniable reality. They are no longer satisfied with their status as 'idea factories', merely churning out reports and struggling to affect the policy-making agenda from the outside. Instead, they have embarked on the path to becoming Strategic Decision Support Systems, which are inevitably embedded within the state. They are no longer merely advocacy groups; they have begun re-calibrating the very decision-making processes of the sovereign state by acting as its cognitive nervous system; filtering informational noise and providing complex algorithms to navigate crises.

Methodology

Think Tanks have an evolving role in North Africa. To examine it further, this article adopts a qualitative, single-case study design embedded within a critical interpretive framework. By considering the state as a complex adaptive organism rather than a monolithic entity, the study investigates how cognitive infrastructure are built and utilized to navigate the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) paradigm.

Morocco was selected as a paradigmatic case for this study due to its unique trajectory following the 2011 Arab Uprisings. Unlike its neighbours that experienced total regime collapse or extreme coercive entrenchment, the Moroccan coercive apparatus opted for a strategy of adaptation and constitutional reconfiguration. Consequently, the Kingdom witnessed a rapid institutionalization of its strategic foresight and think tank proliferation in the MENA region, making it an ideal environment to study the transition from traditional to technocratic governance.

The empirical foundation of this research relies in a qualitative review of primary institutional documents, secondary academic literature, and qualitative interviews. The data collection focused on two distinct tiers of knowledge production:

1- State and State-Adjacent Outputs: This includes the official mandates, strategic frameworks, and published policy briefs of elite institutions, primarily the Royal Institute for Strategic Studies and the Policy Center for the New South. A critical primary source for this analysis is the official report of the special commission on the new development model (CSMD, 2021).

2- Civil society and Grassroots Outputs: In order to contrast the elite narratives, the study analysed policy notes and white papers produced by youth associations. Furthermore, to capture the lived realities of grassroots knowledge producers, three interviews were conducted with leaders of major Moroccan civil society organizations that are dedicated to youth engagement. These organisations are collaborating extensively with international donors (*bailleurs de fonds*) and represent a highly active nodes of non-state research and advocacy.

A purposive sampling was used in the selection of the interviewees from civil society organisations, under specific criteria:

- a- The civil society organisation must be a formally recognised entity operating in Morocco;
- b- It must be dedicated to youth engagement;
- c- It must be actively producing research and policy documents;
- d- It must be operating with project funding from international donors.

The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted in person mainly in cities of Casablanca and Rabat. The collected documents and interview transcripts were subjected to a rigorous qualitative thematic analysis. The interview data was transcribed and manually coded to identify recurring patterns and sentiments. Specifically, an inductive coding process generated key terms, notably “bureaucratic paternalism”, “epistemic marginalization”, and “the disconnect between funding and policy impact”. These findings were then analysed with the theoretical lenses of organisational theory and critical governance studies. By juxtaposing the high receptivity of the state to elite think tank outputs with the lived experiences of civil society actors feeling unheard, the analytical framework effectively operationalizes the concept of the strategic Decision-Support System (SDSS) while exposing the epistemic inequalities inherent in hybrid regimes.

Surviving in an Authoritarian World: The Need for Foresight

Before understanding the ontological shift of Moroccan think tanks, it is necessary to first examine the profound impact of the 2011 uprisings on regional architectures of power. For decades, the very existence of regional states rested on their ability to balance coercive capabilities with patronage networks and exclusive elite decision-making groups.

Yet, the sudden rise of civil society movements highlighted the most critical weakness of these regimes: a profound lack of state vision. The ability of regional security and intelligence agencies to suppress dissent has always been impressive; however, they have consistently failed to understand the underlying socioeconomic factors and cultural shifts that fueled public protests (Bellin, 2012; Gause, 2011).

The concept of authoritarian adaptation evolved significantly in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. For regional state actors, the practice of relying on intuition to navigate the political environment has become antiquated. To survive in a highly mobilized and scrutinized public sphere, regimes have had to develop more sophisticated and adaptive ways of "reading the room," a phenomenon scholars refer to as "authoritarian learning" (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011).

For Morocco, this realization prompted a conscious shift toward technocratic governance and structural change. The state requires "sensors"; entities capable of identifying and understanding the complexities of the social landscape, predicting future crises, and developing viable, informed alternatives for policymakers before public frustration evolves to threaten the system itself.

This is precisely where the think tank fits into contemporary Moroccan politics, moving from academic marginality to the very center of decision-making. As the state seeks a delicate balance between the need for gradual democratic reforms and the imperative of political continuity, the policy-making process has become a crucial focal point. Think tanks, with their ability to aggregate massive amounts of information and translate academic theory into actionable policy briefs, have become a unique commodity for the state. They offer a safe space for policymakers to discuss and debate scenarios without expending the political capital of the sovereign (Abelson, 2018).

Making Foresight a Part of Institutions: The Structure of Morocco's Think Tank Ecosystem

In the Moroccan context, the evolution of think tanks deviates significantly from the Anglo-Saxon paradigm, which defines these organizations as non-governmental, non-profit institutions with a high degree of autonomy from the government. Morocco has instead developed a sophisticated model of Strategic Decision Support Systems (SDSS), where think tanks operate as intellectual bridges that align academic research with the strategic, long-term requirements of the state, focusing on national stability and regional influence.

In this model, the most influential think tanks are "state-embedded" or "state-adjacent" organizations. Their primary task is not to provide critical public feedback to the government, but rather to optimize public policy internally and enrich the state's strategic flexibility on the world stage (McGann, 2020).

At the apex of this institutional chain of command is the Royal Institute for Strategic Studies (IRES). Created with the goal of supporting decision-making at the highest levels of the state, IRES is the very embodiment of institutionalized foresight. It acts as a macroscopic sensor for leadership, carefully studying and analyzing global megatrends and translating them into usable intelligence for the state and its citizens. By internalizing this level of analysis, the state shields itself from the vicissitudes of electoral politics, thereby ensuring continuity in public management.

Equally essential to the ecosystem are robust, semi-autonomous actors like the Policy Center for the New South (PCNS). Operating under the auspices of major national economic actors, PCNS is situated at the dynamic intersection of economic diplomacy, academic research, and public policy. It exemplifies the evolution of modern Moroccan think tanks beyond mere idea factories. Through their immense convening power, entities like PCNS project Moroccan soft power while injecting international expertise into the national arena. They serve as essential bridges, translating economic statistics and international relations theory into practical strategies for South-South cooperation and national development.

From a human capital perspective, the professionals populating these spaces: often a blend of seasoned technocrats, former ministers, and a new generation of highly

trained researchers, serve as the system's intellectual diplomats. They navigate a daily reality requiring them to traverse the intricate, often rigid corridors of the traditional bureaucracy. This dynamic was clearly evident in the development of the New Development Model (CSMD, 2021), a historic milestone largely enabled by the intellectual scaffolding these research spaces provide.

However, this institutionalisation of foresight must be analysed with critical nuance. While Moroccan think tanks function as sophisticated cognitive tools for navigating uncertainty, they are not entirely neutral instruments of rational governance. In the context of a hybrid regime, these state adjacent organizations also serve a deeply political function: they often help legitimize centralized structures by depolarizing social conflict and translating deeply political challenges into technocratic problems. By filtering knowledge through an elite state sanctioned lens, these institutions can inadvertently, act as mechanisms of state co-optation, insulating policy-making from democratic pressure while reinforcing the hegemonic narratives of the central state. Therefore, their role as an SDSS must be understood as a dual mechanism of both governance enhancement and authoritarian adaptation.

The Unevenness of Influence: Elite Think Tanks vs. Civil Society organisations

Understanding the link between knowledge production and decision-making in Morocco requires looking beyond the formal conference halls of elite institutions and examining the profound unevenness within the nation's intellectual ecosystem. The narrative of a state continuously transitioning toward evidence-based policy-making obscures a dual-process model of cognition.

On the first tier sit formal, state-adjacent think tanks, such as PCNS. Because these entities are structurally embedded within the state's economic and diplomatic networks, their outputs are readily operationalized by decision-makers. They possess the institutional pedigree required to bypass bureaucratic resistance and directly influence sovereign strategy (Sater, 2007).

However, a second, highly active tier of knowledge production exists parallel to this elite architecture: Moroccan civil society. Across the country, specialized youth associations, parallel youth governments, and research networks focused on public

management produce a constant stream of highly detailed policy notes, memorandums, and livres blancs (white papers). These documents are often rigorously researched and, crucially, far more attuned to the microscopic, territorial realities of the VUCA paradigm than the macro-level models generated in Rabat. They capture the immediate socioeconomic grievances of the youth, the friction of local administration, and the lived realities of public service delivery.

Yet, despite the empirical value of these grassroots documents, a formidable bureaucratic wall stands in their way. This disconnect was starkly highlighted during qualitative interviews, conducted for this study, with representatives from three major Moroccan civil society organisations dedicated to youth engagement. Despite operating with significant project funding from international donors (bailleurs de fonds) and producing high volume of meticulously researched reports, these leaders expressed a profound sense of disenfranchisement. They reported feeling unheard, noting that the considerable time, money, and resources invested in their publications are effectively waste if public decision-makers and elected bodies do not read or operationalize their findings.

A profound paradox emerges: While the state actively calls for participatory governance and the integration of citizens, especially the youth, into decision-making processes, the intellectual outputs of these associations are rarely integrated into the formal apparatus (Cairney, 2016). When a civil society organization publishes a document, it is frequently met with bureaucratic paternalism. The administration often treats these documents not as practical insights or usable data, but merely as an exercise in civic participation; acknowledging the effort but offering no actual integration into policy.

By recognizing elite think tanks as the sole legitimate engines of strategic foresight while marginalizing civil society's knowledge production, the state creates a dangerous cognitive blind spot. Elite think tanks are exceptional at diagnosing global shifts, but they often lack the granular sensors required to detect brewing local discontent. Therefore, the true frontier of Moroccan institutional reform is not just establishing more elite think tanks, but democratizing the state's receptivity to the profound knowledge already being produced by its civil society and youth networks.

Conclusion

The political environment that has come to define the North African region post-2011 has irrevocably changed the rules of the game for state survival. As this article has demonstrated, the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of the modern world cannot be managed through traditional means of control; rather, the institutionalization of foresight is an absolute necessity.

As part of a broader regional transition, the case study of Morocco represents an exemplary model of pragmatism at work. The think tanks within the Moroccan system have undoubtedly undergone an ontological shift, becoming the very essence of Strategic Decision Support Systems that serve as the state's cognitive nervous system.

By incorporating these institutes into its strategic structure, the state has found an effective way to filter out informational noise and optimize public management without undermining its authority. This collaborative decision-making process enables the safe testing of complex scenarios, shielding national developmental processes from political turmoil. As such, these think tanks are not mere diplomatic niceties, but rather the lifeblood of authoritarian adaptation.

However, as this institutional architecture matures, a new tier of challenges will arise. While the state has succeeded in incorporating technocratic foresight at the macroeconomic level, the real test will be its ability to decentralize this knowledge. Evidence-based policy-making will only be revolutionary if the insights generated by elite think tanks hold relevance at the level of territorial collectivities. The future of public management in Morocco will depend heavily on bridging the gap between central strategy and local reality.

Furthermore, as highlighted in the report of the New Development Model, resilience must be a bottom-up effort. The next evolutionary phase for these institutions must involve deeper structural engagement with civil society organizations and the active incorporation of youth leadership into policy-making processes. Think tanks can then function as a bridge between the sovereign state and an increasingly mobilized youth, ensuring that authoritarian learning evolves toward truly democratic, participatory governance. The ultimate test for Moroccan think tanks will be their ability to democratize foresight and empower the nation's future leaders to navigate the VUCA paradigm together.

References

- Abelson, D. E. (2018). *Do think tanks matter? Evaluating the impact of public policy institutes* (3rd ed.). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Bellin, E. (2012). Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring. *Comparative Politics*, 44(2), 127–149.
- Bennett, N., & Lemoine, G. J. (2014). What a difference a word makes: Understanding threats to performance in a VUCA world. *Business Horizons*, 57(3), 311–317.
- Cairney, P. (2016). *The politics of evidence-based policymaking*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Commission Spéciale sur le Modèle de Développement. (2021). *Le nouveau modèle de développement : Libérer les énergies et restaurer la confiance pour accélérer la marche vers le progrès et la prospérité pour tous*. Royaume du Maroc.
- Gause, F. G., III. (2011). Why Middle East studies missed the Arab Spring: The myth of authoritarian stability. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(4), 81-90.
- Hanafi, S., & Arvanitis, R. (2015). *Knowledge production in the Arab world: The impossible promise*. Routledge.
- Heydemann, S. (2007). *Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world* (Analysis Paper No. 13). Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy.
- Heydemann, S., & Leenders, R. (2011). Authoritarian learning and authoritarian resilience: Regime responses to the 'Arab Awakening'. *Globalizations*, 8(5), 647–653.
- McGann, J. G. (2020). *2020 global go to think tank index report*. Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, University of Pennsylvania.
- Sater, J. N. (2007). *Civil society and political change in Morocco*. Routledge.
- Stone, D. (2013). *Knowledge actors and transnational governance: The private-public policy nexus in the global agora*. Palgrave Macmillan.