

2nd Edition of the Rabat Policy Forum 2026

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Organized by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA)

Fractured Social Contract : Citizens, State and Trust in Institutions in MENA

Submission Guidelines

- **Format:** Extended abstract (500–1,000 words) / and full paper (5,000–7,000 words)
- **Languages:** English or Arabic
- **Deadline for submissions:** March 30, 2026
- **Notification of acceptance:** April 30, 2026
- **Final papers due:** August 15, 2026

Crisis of the Social Contract in the MENA Region

In recent years, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have experienced popular uprisings that have eroded citizens' trust in their governments. Some observers trace these events back to how the relationship between the state and society was shaped after these countries gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, specifically the nature of their social contract¹. Essentially, governments that came to power in these countries focused on providing social benefits, often at the expense of limiting citizens' participation in important political and economic decisions. A growing population and a more challenging economic environment have weakened this governance system and fostered widespread discontent with governments and their institutions. Additionally, this region faces multiple challenges stemming from an increasingly unsustainable social contract. These issues are driven by the rentier nature of some states, political instability in others, and the heightened vulnerabilities to health pandemics and climate change. Economic opportunities for ordinary citizens have been constrained by vertical power structures and exclusive networks linking business actors with political elites, leading to greater socio-economic inequality². Consequently, corruption, lack of transparency, elite capture, and political coercion have become widespread concerns, leading to a low level of trust in governments and motivating citizens to pursue political change.

The popular protests of 2011 were a moment of announcement of the collapse of the existing “social contract” in the countries of the MENA region. It became clear that the so-called social contracts were one-sided, as citizens across the region openly rejected the underpinnings of the authoritarian bargains³. As a result, after 2011, a renegotiation of existing social contracts began, particularly in Tunisia, where a regime change occurred, and also in Jordan, where the king attempted to manage with less ambitious reforms.

¹ Loewe, M., Zintl, T., & Houdret, A. (2021). The social contract as a tool of analysis: Introduction to the special issue on “Framing the evolution of new social contracts in Middle Eastern and North African countries”. *World Development*, 145, 104982

² Gasmî, F., Kouakou, D., Noumba Um, P., & Rojas Milla, P. (2023). An empirical analysis of the social contract in the MENA region and the role of digitalization in its transformation.

³ Arab Fractures: Citizens, States, And Social Contracts, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017. P: 15.

⁴ Loewe, M., Zintl, T., & Houdret, A. (2021). The social contract as a tool of analysis: Introduction to the special issue on “Framing the evolution of new social contracts in Middle Eastern and North African countries”. *World Development*, 145, 104982



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In Egypt, however, the old social contract reemerged after two years of social and political turmoil, in an even more repressive form. Other countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya have since fallen into civil wars and will likely not return to peace until all parties agree on a new social contract⁴. Specifically, in post-2011 Morocco, the momentum of street protests led to the amendment of the Constitution, which offered some margins of political openness. However, this openness did not last long, due to several setbacks since 2016.

The 2011 Constitution did not bring about a fundamental transformation in governance. Nearly a decade later, the initially anticipated political reforms gave way to signs of regression, including the securitization of protests, increased pressure on the media, and restrictions on public freedoms. Moreover, the Moroccan economy remains weak and unable to integrate the youth and unemployed, which resulted in other protests in the Rif, Jerada and other regions since late 2016⁵. In 2021, King Mohammed V appointed a commission to release a new vision for Moroccan state-society relations: the New Development Model (NMD). The New Model of Development (NMD) was introduced partly in response to growing public dissatisfaction with the limited progress of reforms pledged in 2011, following the Arab Uprisings that reshaped political dynamics across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The NMD establishes the foundations for a renewed social contract in Morocco, envisioned as a national collective and federative project. It is structured around a national development pact and an enhanced system of social protection referred to as a social pact or social contract (CSM, 2021)⁶.

The MENA context is closely linked to larger global shifts. Across different regions, several overlapping crises are affecting how states can maintain legitimacy and fulfill their responsibilities.

- **Geopolitical shocks:** The Russia–Ukraine war disrupted global food and energy supplies, pushing wheat prices up by 50% in 2022, with North Africa, one of the most import-dependent regions, was particularly hard hit⁷. Rising debt burdens, especially in Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon, highlight the fragility of state provision under external shocks⁸.
- **Climate crisis:** North Africa is among the most climate-vulnerable areas globally. The World Bank estimates that by 2050, climate change could force more than 19 million internal climate migrants in North Africa⁹. Morocco already faces severe drought cycles, affecting agricultural livelihoods and water security. Climate stress does not only challenge livelihoods, it directly erodes the credibility of governments unable to mitigate its impacts.
- **Economic instability:** Post-COVID recovery has been uneven. Inflation in MENA reached 9.9% in 2024¹⁰, disproportionately affecting the poor. Rising interest rates and currency devaluations have deepened inequality, while austerity-driven subsidy reforms, often demanded by international lenders, further eroded the social contract by reducing protections for vulnerable groups.

5 <https://mipa.institute/?p=7424&lang=en>

6 Houdret, A., & Furness, M. (2024). Intermediary organizations, international cooperation and the changing social contract: Morocco's new development model. *Mediterranean Politics*, 1-26.

7 Kuhla, K., Puma, M. J., & Otto, C. (2024). International cooperation was key to stabilize wheat prices after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *Communications Earth & Environment*, 5(1), 481.

8 Sinani, A. State Failure and External Debt Crisis in the MENA region. https://www.cife.eu/Ressources/FCK/image/Theses/2025/GEGPA_Sinani_Thesis_2025.pdf

9 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/13/climate-change-could-force-216-million-people-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries-by-2050#:~:text=Decisive%20collective%20action%20could%20reduce,the%20least%20to%20its%20causes>.

10 <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/inflation/MENA/#:~:text=Inflation:%20percent%20change%20in%20the,MENA>

11 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/moroccans-vote-parliament-election-under-new-voting-rules-2021-09-08/>



- **Digital transformation:** Digitalization offers both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it enables transparency, citizen monitoring, and innovative service delivery. On the other, regimes have deployed digital authoritarianism, using surveillance, censorship, and disinformation to constrain dissent. This dual nature makes digital governance a battleground of the new social contract, especially for younger populations who are digitally native but politically disengaged.

- **Political apathy and civic innovation:** Voter apathy is rising worldwide, global voter turnout dropped significantly. In Morocco for example, turnout in the 2021 parliamentary elections barely surpassed 50% despite state efforts to mobilize participation¹¹. Yet alongside apathy, new forms of civic innovation are emerging: local accountability initiatives, leaderless protest movements, and citizen monitoring platforms in Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon demonstrate that citizens are not disengaged, but rather disillusioned with political channels;

The Need for a New Social Contract

The persistence of socio-economic inequalities, high youth unemployment, weak protection mechanisms and restricted political participation across MENA signals that the post-independence social contract has lost much of its legitimacy and effectiveness. The uprisings of 2010–2011 revealed the fragility of the old state–society bargain, while subsequent reforms have produced mixed outcomes from Tunisia’s democratic experiment to Morocco’s New Development Model and to renewed authoritarianism or conflict elsewhere. At the same time, new pressures such as climate change, wars, pandemics and global economic volatility further strain governments’ capacity to deliver on citizens’ expectations. In this context, there is growing need for a new political contract, which can define the framework governing the roles of the state and its institutions, as well as the rules and conditions that must be respected and worked within.

The Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA) dedicates the second edition of the “Rabat Policy Forum 2026” to the question of social contract in light of the current institutional situation characterized by high levels of citizens’ mistrust in political institutions. The upcoming annual conference will provide an opportunity for public critical debate of the factors that led to the decline in trust levels. It aims also at analyzing the roles of the legislative institution in drafting a new social contract to help achieve economic development and social stability through proposing alternatives that would bypass the current stalemate and establish the ground for a new social and political contract.

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/moroccans-vote-parliament-election-under-new-voting-rules-2021-09-08/>



Rabat Policy Forum 2026

The forum is meant for research and political debate. It is held annually, gathering researchers as well as decision makers from different Moroccan and international institutions and universities. It provides a platform to discuss public policy issues and their evaluation, both in Morocco and overseas.

The aim is to introduce a profound critical academic dialogue between the specialists in the domain of public policy analysis and decision makers to achieve a comprehensive diagnosis of public policies through constructive criticism, proposing policy alternatives and thinking of potential solutions.

Proceedings of the forum will culminate in publishing research in Arabic and English, which will be provided to decision makers and experts in Morocco and other countries.

Duration	2 days
Participants	50 participants: (50% Morocco; 25% Maghreb & MENA ; 25% International)
Languages	English and Arabic (with simultaneous translation)
Panels	5 panels (each 1h15); 4 panelists per panel; each presenting for 10 minutes, followed by Q&A.
Call for Papers	Open call for submission of policy papers; Selection by an independent Scientific Committee (see annex); Selected papers are to be presented in panels/ published.

This Forum seeks to cover a variety of aspects of the social contract in the MENA region. Hence, the primary premise to this issue requires measuring the active engagement of major political and economic actors (the state institutions, political parties, unions, businessmen, intellectual elites, and civil society actors) to renew the current social contract.



To establish a new institutional order, it is important that the main actors negotiate and participate in the process. The debate on social contract also requires questioning the prevailing economic model, especially when it comes to the fairness of the tax system, allocation of resources, and the education system's role in establishing a more robust social contract that is better able to meet the social demand of different social groups. More specifically, the forum will focus on the following main axes in particular:

The old social contract: identifying malfunctions

This axis seeks to identify the elements on which the old social contract was based, and the reasons leading to its failure. The primary focus will be on political, economic and sociological factors that explain the failure of the old social contract.

What Role Can Parliament Play in Shaping a New Social Contract?

Reconstructing the political institutions requires establishing democratic institutions with real representation and restricted powers, and cementing the principle of citizenship as a condition for any new social contract. Hence, this axis deals with the current role of the parliamentary institution in mediating between the citizen and the state, tries to describe the roles that the parliament currently plays, identifies the malfunctions marking the performance of the legislative institution, and also reflects on the opportunities and possible alternatives for the parliament to play greater roles.

A new social contract: What are the institutional pre-requisites?

This axis seeks to explain the reasons behind the need to develop a new social contract, as well as the pre-requisites, terms and content of the contract, in addition to identifying the parties involved in this contract. It also seeks to try to anticipate the future and the prospects for the establishment of a new social contract by answering the following questions: What are the chances of drafting a new social contract? What is the role of citizens and civil society in negotiating a new social contract? What are the institutional mechanisms and political values that either help or hinder trust-building in institutions?

New Social Movements and the Renewal of the Social Contract

This axis explores how emerging social movements, particularly those led by digitally connected youth, are reshaping state–society relations and influencing the renewal of the social contract in Morocco and across the MENA region. From the February 20 Movement to the recent Gen Z 212 mobilization, protest dynamics have evolved toward decentralized, technology-driven forms of engagement that bypass traditional intermediaries such as political parties and unions.

These movements express growing demands for social justice, accountability, and inclusion, challenging existing governance models and questioning the responsiveness of institutions. The discussion will analyze how digital activism and youth-led mobilization can be transformed from spontaneous protest into constructive participation, contributing to rebuilding trust and redefining the principles of a new, more inclusive social contract.

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Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis

MIPA Institute is an independent think tank founded by a group of researchers from different specialties and scientific backgrounds. Part of its core objectives is to provide analyses to public policies in Morocco and other MENA countries. These analyses cover different political, economic, and social domains. Through its works, MIPA Institute seeks to give advice to the officials and governmental and non-governmental institutions as well as all kind of civil society bodies, meeting rigorous methodological standards adopting impartiality and accuracy.



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