Evolution in Morocco is the focus of a momentous national debate that if successful, could result in bringing government services much closer to this restive people.

The focus of the debate is aimed at amending the law governing municipalities. With many social and political actors involved in the discussions, including ordinary citizens, elected officials, government and civil society and none other than King Mohammed VI himself, changes to the law could come soon. Others could follow.

When King Mohammed succeeded his father to the throne in July 1999, there was an atmosphere of optimism and the process of democratization began. But the pace of the democratization and decentralization has not always kept up with people’s expectations.

The benefits of the reforms of 1999 and the impending changes in governance and services for poorer citizens did not, nor could they possibly, change Morocco’s social conditions overnight. More than 4.2 million of the country’s 34 million people live on less than $1 per person a day. As well, 38 per cent of the population is illiterate, 1.7 million people live in shanty towns and 11 per cent of working-age young people are unemployed.

Terrorists attack
Little more than five years ago, with these alarming social indicators as a backdrop, several radical Islamist groups were successfully recruiting underprivileged youth in Morocco. In May 2003, the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country’s history conflagrated in Casablanca. A total of 12 suicide bombers died, along with 33 civilians, and 100 were injured. Another seven suicide bombers blew themselves up in Casablanca in March and April 2007. In both cases, most of the bombers were from the shanty towns of Sidi Moumen in the suburbs of Casablanca.

Response to roots of the attacks
The king stepped in. In Morocco, the king’s support is often crucial to whether a reform project goes through or not. In formal politics, under the constitution of Morocco, the king can appoint the prime minister and the cabinet after a democratic election, and can dismiss any cabinet minister. In informal politics, the involvement of the monarch can launch a political project on its way to success.

After the first attacks, the king launched the National Initiative for Human Development to place social issues at the top of the country’s priorities. This initiative was aimed at empowering citizens to participate in decision-making at the local level.

In a speech in July 2006, the monarch said there was a strategic need to evaluate Morocco’s “experience in local democracy, and to explore possibilities to enlarge the space for democratic
practice, (and) to give a new impulse to decentralization and regionalization dynamics so that decentralized management of public services becomes a basic rule.”

In layman’s terms, the king was calling for broadening of democracy in his country and for decentralization.

In light of this speech, and with municipal elections coming in 2009, the Ministry of the Interior launched a national debate to reform the law governing municipalities in Morocco, known as the Communal Charter.

This was to be an important step toward enabling local governments to improve delivery of services to citizens and create a more inclusive and transparent management style at the local level. Since then, more than 20 legal experts have fanned out, holding workshops in the country’s 16 regions, involving the leaders and members of local communes, members of civil society groups and citizens.

The discussions and the debate centre on one topic: reforming the Communal Charter. These consultations are focusing on clearly defining powers at the subnational level; protecting local autonomy; and providing the necessary funding and trained staff for municipal governments.

Clearer powers

Subnational governments in Morocco come in three forms:

- the municipality (led by a mayor elected for a six-year term),
- the province (led by an appointed governor),
- the region (led by a regional governor appointed by the king).

While the regions have been given significant responsibilities in social assistance and economic development matters, municipalities have been granted similar responsibility over socio-economic development through the 2002 Communal Charter. Yet, this law did not specify how overlapping responsibilities in socio-economic matters are to be shared.

Nor did the Communal Charter specify functions or relations within the locally elected councils in major cities like Casablanca, Rabat, Marrakech and Tangiers. In these four cities, there is a single municipal council – headed by an elected mayor with exclusive fiscal authority – which sits atop several local municipalities.

In Morocco, a local municipality (commune in Moroccan French) can be either an independent municipality in the countryside or a municipal district within a large metropolis. The resulting ambiguity between the city and the municipality has been a key obstacle confounding efficient and democratic decentralized management.

Protecting local autonomy

Morocco’s urban and rural municipal governments are governed primarily by Article 69 of the Communal Charter which contains a long list of municipal council decisions that require pre-approval by the Ministries of Finance and the Interior, in the case of urban communes; and of the regional governor or the governor in the case of rural communes. This mandatory pre-approval covers almost every expenditure line item. It even extends to the naming of city streets. The law defines the precise procedures that need to be followed for such pre-approval and stipulates sanctions for any violation of the procedures by the local communes.

During one confrontation in 2006, the governor of the city of Meknes rejected the program that the elected municipal council had developed to reflect local citizens’ priorities, which council members had promised to address during the election campaign. Instead, the governor used the nationally determined plan, as set by the central authorities, to design and implement local development projects.

Prof. El Manar Esslimi of Mohammed V University in Rabat, one of the specialists working on the reforms of the Communal Charter, said the coming reforms will have the effect of pressuring central authorities for “less concern about legal compliance with formal rules at the local level, and a more strategic role in monitoring and evaluating local performance in delivering services.” He added that there will also be provisions to encourage citizens’ involvement as the most efficient mechanism for accountability and oversight.

Saad Guerrouani, the youngest member of the municipal council of Martil, a town in northern Morocco, stated in an interview that “the new reforms should necessarily reflect the trust that citizens have expressed when they voted for us.”

“Heavy control hinders our capacity to program and execute investments in a timely and effective manner.”

“Our hands are now handcuffed … they should be released so that we can serve our communes better,” Guerrouani added.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32
COLOMBIA [FROM PAGE 16]

Demands for accountability
There is still concern about the adequacy of procedures for financial accountability given to regions and cities. Ex-finance minister Rudolf Hommes told the leading national newspaper, El Tiempo, in 2006: “Since the constitutional changes of 1991 – which gave local governments the power and responsibility to make autonomous decisions in the areas of education, health and basic services, while transferring national resources so that those local and regional governments could adequately fulfill those obligations … there was a prevailing sense that the control mechanisms to ensure that the mayors and governors would fulfill those constitutional responsibilities were lacking”

But despite internal pressures, Colombia does not have the kind of territorial concentration of linguistic, ethnic or religious identities that could threaten to break the country apart. There are no strong minority groups to oppose the current unitary government structure, or to demand a federal system. Nevertheless, the centralized governance that prevailed since the late 19th century contributed significantly to the country’s many decades of internal conflicts.

Many pundits agree that since the early 1980s, Colombia has taken dramatic steps in the right direction. If the past 20 years is to serve as a roadmap for the future, Colombia needs to keep moving down the road in the direction of a more deeply decentralized structure, in which the interests, identities and demands of all inhabitants find meaningful expression at the national level.

MOROCCO [FROM PAGE 18]

Empowering local governments to deliver better services leads to one important question: are the financial and human resource capabilities sufficient to meet the challenges that the country is facing? Morocco’s rapid urbanization is accompanied by an increasing need for municipal investment in the areas of infrastructure, sanitation, water and electricity services, transportation and urban development.

“The investment needed to meet increasing demand would require not only an increase in (its) own (internally generated) revenues, but improved ability to borrow and attract private investment,” said Mostapha El Haya, a member of the majority in the Casablanca City Council, in an interview with the Casablanca newspaper Al Massae on March 15. “It would also require stronger municipal human resources capability,” said Said Essaadi, an opposition member of the city’s council, in an interview with Al Massae on the same day.

Prospects for regional autonomy
With moves to amend the urban laws and to provide financial and human resources for cities and towns, municipal government reform is off to a good start in Morocco. The next area for the legislature to take on will most likely be regional government, a reform that might possibly begin in the unlikely location of Western Sahara.

MALAYSIA [FROM PAGE 28]

and also the federal Public Works Minister, and one of four ministers toppled in the election.

Indian-Malaysian anger at their economic and political marginalization had manifested itself in a massive demonstration in Kuala Lumpur last November, organized by a group calling itself the Hindu Rights Action Front.

Chinese-Malaysians were unhappy with the sluggish economy and the inability of the National Front government under Prime Minister Badawi to promote Malaysia’s competitiveness regionally.

They were also incensed by the actions of the Youth leader of the Malay party in the National Front who, brandishing an unsheathed double-edged Malayan dagger in his party’s assembly, had called for bringing back pro-Malay affirmative action policies.

There were also concerns about inflation caused by the hikes in fuel prices, rising crime rates, alleged corruption and abuses by National Front leaders in the local councils and state governments.

These urban issues perhaps explain why the more developed states of Penang, Selangor and Perak, as well as ten out of fourteen seats in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur fell to the opposition.

In Penang, Lim Guan Eng, 47, the Democratic Action Party’s secretary-general, has been appointed the new chief minister. This most unlikely of chief ministers is now tasked with fostering harmonious relations with the National Front federal government that had detained him.

He has declared that he will review many of the “megaprojects” that the National Front state government had approved. In the state of Selangor, his counterpart from the People’s Justice Party is also reviewing the water privatization project of his National Front predecessor on grounds that the people and the state do not appear to be benefiting from the agreement signed.

For Malaysia to build upon the election outcome, and strengthen the federation, it is expected the federal government in Kuala Lumpur will curtail the coalition’s practice of encroaching on the powers of state governments.