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Disaster Governance, Uncertainty, and the Reproduction of Fragility: The Case of Morocco

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Introduction

On September 8, 2023, at 11:11 PM local time, Morocco's Atlas Mountains region experienced a Mw 6.8 earthquake, the most severe seismic event to affect the country in over a century. Centered near the village of Ighil in Al Haouz province, approximately 72 km southwest of Marrakech, the earthquake affected an area of 31,000 km² (comparable in size to Belgium) with tremors felt up to 500 km away. The main shock, followed by a Mw 4.9 aftershock, caused extensive destruction within seconds. Official figures reported 2,946 fatalities, 5,500 injuries, and nearly 500,000 people displaced (Ottria et al., 2025). Material damage was extensive: 60,000 homes were damaged, including 19,000 destroyed; 530 schools were affected; and critical infrastructure was disrupted as landslides blocked 20 major roads and over 100 rural access routes across six provinces (Larhlilda, 2025, p. 195).

Beyond its physical devastation, the earthquake exposed significant institutional strains in Morocco's disaster response system, particularly in the distribution of emergency aid and the organization of post-earthquake reconstruction efforts. After more than a decade of constitutional and decentralization reforms following the 2011 Constitution and the adoption of advanced regionalization laws in 2015, the emergency response remained highly centralized, with decision-making concentrated within the Ministry of the Interior. Local authorities, formally designated as first responders, faced severe constraints due to limited resources, access to information and the absence of emergency funding mechanisms, and administrative procedures requiring approval from centrally appointed governors.

This article argues that disasters do not merely expose pre-existing state fragility; they actively reproduce it by redistributing experience, information, and authority under conditions of deep uncertainty. While existing literature recognizes crises as moments of heightened uncertainty, this study shows that the systematic exclusion of elected local representatives during disaster response and reconstruction channels learning, legitimacy, and operational experience toward centralized institutions, in this case, particularly the Ministry of the Interior and its appointed governors. As centrally appointed authorities manage aid distribution and reconstruction decisions, they accumulate institutional capacity and political legitimacy, while locally elected actors are deprived of meaningful decision-making roles and opportunities to build experience. Disasters thus become critical moments in which reliance on centralized authority strengthens the center and weakens decentralized governance, leaving local communities with limited agency over recovery processes and reinforcing longer-term patterns of state fragility.

This article applies the OECD Authority–Legitimacy–Capacity (ALC) framework in combination with typologies of uncertainty developed by Stirling (1999) and Walker et al. (2013) to analyze disaster governance under conditions of deep uncertainty. Empirically, the analysis draws on two primary sources: a mixed-methods study based on 150 interviews conducted across earthquake-affected communes by Malhouni and Mabrouki (2025), and a

one-year reconstruction monitoring report produced by Transparency Morocco's L'Observatoire (2024). A brief comparative perspective with Türkiye's 2023 earthquake response is used for analytic contrast, not regime comparison, to highlight different modes of centralized uncertainty management across contexts.

This article examines the historical development of both decentralisation policies and the institutional role of the Ministry of the Interior to explain why Morocco's earthquake response remained centralised despite formal decentralisation reforms. Sections 3 to 5 analyse how Morocco's decentralisation unfolded as a controlled process that preserved central authority and how the Ministry of the Interior, building on colonial-era administrative structures, became the state's primary crisis management institution. This historical analysis shows that the 2023 earthquake response reflected institutional continuities that were not fundamentally altered by decentralisation reforms.

1. Theoretical Framework: State Fragility, Uncertainty, and the Limits of Centralized Governance

To analyze how Morocco's disaster response reflects broader dynamics of state fragility and centralized governance, this study integrates two complementary bodies of literature. The first examines state fragility through the lenses of authority, legitimacy, and capacity, focusing on how these dimensions are tested under conditions of crisis. The second addresses uncertainty in disaster governance, drawing on scholarship on decision-making under risk, ambiguity, and incomplete information to explain how crises expose institutional limits and coordination failures.

1.1 Conceptual Perspectives on State Fragility

State fragility has traditionally been conceptualized through Weberian notions of sovereignty, emphasizing the state's ability to perform core functions of authority, legitimacy, and capacity (Migdal, 2001; Carment et al., 2008, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2007). This approach crystallized in the Authority–Legitimacy–Capacity (ALC) framework, which remains a central analytical tool in both academic and policy-oriented research. Authority refers to the state's capacity to enforce laws and control territory; legitimacy denotes public acceptance of state rule; and capacity captures the ability to mobilize resources and deliver essential services (OECD, 2007). From this perspective, states are considered fragile when deficits in one or more of these dimensions undermine effective governance and public goods provision (Goldstone, 2008; Takeuchi et al., 2011).

While the ALC framework offers a valuable institutional lens, it only partially captures the dynamic processes through which fragility is produced and sustained. More recent approaches, particularly the OECD's risk-based framework (2016; 2025), extend this perspective by defining fragility as the interaction between exposure to risk and limited

capacity to cope across political, security, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions. Fragility, in this view, is not a static condition but a relational and situational outcome that becomes especially visible during periods of stress. This shift is particularly relevant for disaster governance, where the ability to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to shocks is central to state resilience.

1.2 The Complex Origins of State Fragility

Existing scholarship emphasizes the multidimensional and multi-causal nature of state fragility (Carment et al., 2010). Rather than reflecting uniform weaknesses, fragile states are shaped by overlapping and mutually reinforcing pressures. Quantitative research has linked fragility to factors such as civil conflict, natural resource dependence, and armed rebellion, particularly when combined with poverty, social exclusion, or political repression (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Ross, 2004; Collier et al., 2009). Prolonged conflict further erodes public goods provision and institutional capacity, deepening fragility over time.

Institutionalist approaches highlight how fragility emerges from specific state–society configurations. Drawing on the concept of limited access orders (North et al., 2012), this literature shows how clientelism, rent-seeking, and extractive institutions sustain political control while weakening administrative and economic systems (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Such arrangements generate path dependencies that undermine crisis management and make fragility self-reinforcing.

From a functionalist perspective, fragility is understood through gaps in authority, legitimacy, and capacity (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Stewart & Brown, 2009). Failures in law enforcement and territorial control signal authority deficits; inadequate service delivery reflects capacity gaps; and declining public trust indicates legitimacy erosion. When these failures coincide, states risk entering persistent cycles of governance breakdown (Goldstone, 2008; Takeuchi et al., 2011).

Finally, critical and structural approaches emphasize the role of exogenous and historical factors. Transnational security threats, regional spillovers, and global economic vulnerabilities can exacerbate fragility (Patrick, 2007; Collier, 2007; Iqbal & Starr, 2008). Dependency theory, world-systems theory, and post-development perspectives further argue that colonial legacies and global inequalities constrain postcolonial state capacity and autonomy, rendering fragility structurally embedded rather than purely domestic (Escobar, 1995; Wallerstein, 2011; Tusalem, 2016). These perspectives also caution against treating fragility as a neutral concept, highlighting its normative and political implications (Elagin,2021).

1.3 Disaster Governance and the Political Recycling of Fragility

Building on these perspectives, disasters provide a critical analytical lens through which the dynamics of state fragility can be observed. Far from being purely natural events, disasters

are deeply social and political phenomena shaped by pre-existing inequalities, governance arrangements, and institutional capacities (Hewitt, 1983; Wisner et al., 2004; Tierney, 2014). Hazards become disasters when they intersect with conditions such as poverty, marginalization, weak infrastructure, and ineffective governance.

Disasters not only expose underlying vulnerabilities but also generate new risks, including displacement, economic disruption, and declining trust in public institutions. As moments of acute stress, they test how authority is exercised, how information circulates, and how decisions are made across levels of governance. In this sense, disasters are not simply disruptions but critical moments in which fragility can be either mitigated or reproduced through institutional responses.

The Moroccan case illustrates this dynamic. The 2023 Al Haouz earthquake struck a socially and territorially marginalized region characterized by high poverty rates and non-seismic housing construction, amplifying vulnerability. Despite formal decentralization reforms, local governments lacked the authority and resources to respond autonomously, revealing the persistence of centralized control. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of fragility, this study examines how disaster-induced uncertainty interacts with centralized governance structures to reproduce fragility over time. It argues that centralized systems face greater difficulty than decentralized ones in managing deep uncertainty, leading to institutional hesitation, risk-averse behavior, and delayed responses that ultimately reinforce the governance weaknesses underlying state fragility.

1.4 Conceptual Framework of Uncertainty in Policy Making

Uncertainty is a central concept in governance, risk studies, and disaster research, reflecting the limits of knowledge and predictability in complex social and environmental systems. Classical approaches to risk management assumed that hazards could be anticipated and their probabilities quantified. In contrast, uncertainty arises when decision-makers cannot fully know or predict the likelihood and consequences of future events, complicating both anticipation and response (Knight, 1921; Stirling, 1999). This distinction is crucial for understanding disaster governance, where the stakes are high and information is often incomplete, delayed, or contested.

To better understand the dynamics of decision-making in times of crisis, uncertainty should be considered a structured, analysable concept rather than a general condition. Researchers have proposed a two-dimensional framework for classifying uncertainty. This framework presents uncertainty as having two fundamental dimensions: (1) location, i.e. where it manifests in the policy analysis framework; and (2) level, i.e. the magnitude ranging from deterministic knowledge to total ignorance. The nature of the uncertainty (epistemic, aleatoric or ambiguity) provides further characterisation within each cell of this two-dimensional matrix (Walker et al., 2013, p. 223). This model enables analysts to identify the location and severity of uncertainty, which is particularly relevant in disaster governance,

where environmental hazards and institutional responses are unpredictable, ambiguous, and contested (Walker et al., 2013, p. 221; Stirling, 1999).

Table 1 shows four locations where uncertainty arises: external forces (earthquakes, pandemics), system response (institutional coordination), outcomes (whether interventions succeed), and stakeholder preferences (competing priorities).

Table 1: Location of Uncertainty in Policy Analysis

Location	Definition	Disaster Governance Examples
Context (External Factors)	External forces beyond policymaker control that produce changes within the system.	Earthquakes, floods, pandemics; timing, intensity, and scope of hazards cannot be fully anticipated.
System (Model Structure and Parameters)	Uncertainty about the system response to external factors and/or policy changes, including model structure uncertainty and parameter uncertainty	Institutional coordination; state-society collaboration; model assumptions.
Outcomes	Cumulative uncertainty from external and system factors affecting outcome predictions.	Aid distribution effectiveness; quality of temporary housing; impact on long-term vulnerability.
Weights	Uncertainty about what different stakeholders consider important and how they weigh trade-offs.	Trade-offs between speed vs. fairness, visibility vs. effectiveness, control vs. autonomy among national authorities, local governments, and civil society actors; changing valuations over time

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Walker et al. (2013)

Table 2 shows five levels of uncertainty, from predictable (1-2) to deep uncertainty (4-5). Lower levels permit standard planning; higher levels require adaptive and more innovative approaches (Walker et al., 2013).

Table 2: Levels of Uncertainty and How to Handle Them

Level	What This Looks Like	What to Do About It
Level 1: Clear Enough Future	Uncertainty exists but stays within predictable limits.	Test sensitivity: See how small changes affect outcomes. Use standard planning and optimization.
Level 2: Alternate Futures (with probabilities)	Outcomes are uncertain, but probabilities can be estimated using statistical methods	Use probability models to test scenarios and plan better decisions.
Level 3: Alternate Futures (with ranking)	Several possible futures can be ranked by how likely they are (very likely, likely), even if exact probabilities can't be given.	No perfect method exists: Either assign probabilities anyway (drops to Level 2) or treat all as equally plausible (jumps to Level 4). Use scenario analysis with expert-ranked scenarios.
Level 4: Deep Uncertainty	Multiple plausible futures exist, but they cannot be ranked. Experts disagree on models, probabilities, or which outcomes matter most.	Explore many possibilities: Use computational experiments and scenario planning. Find policies that work acceptably across many different futures. Normal planning starts to fail here.
Level 5: Recognized Ignorance	Outcomes and probabilities cannot be known. Cascading disasters, compound crises, and system breakdowns are possible.	Use adaptive policies that respond to change by preparing for worst-case scenarios (resistance), enabling rapid recovery (resilience), and allowing course correction as new information emerges (adaptation).

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Walker et al. (2013)

The framework in Tables 1 and 2 establishes a core principle: uncertainty requires institutional openness. At every level, effective response depends on decision-makers gathering information from multiple sources and adapting as conditions change. The deeper the uncertainty, the more essential this openness becomes. Morocco's earthquake created uncertainty across all four locations in Table 1: unpredictable aftershocks and infrastructure collapse (context), unclear coordination across jurisdictions (system), unknown effectiveness of aid distribution (outcomes), and conflicting priorities between central control and community needs (weights). This placed Morocco at Level 4 and 5 deep uncertainty requiring adaptive, distributed responses.

The state responded with Level 2 tools: standardized procedures, fixed aid amounts, centralized approval. Local Reconstruction Commissions excluded elected officials and disaster victims from decisions, and all commission determinations remained unpublished. The response showed selective openness; civil society organizations received recognition for emergency work, but elected local representatives had no meaningful role. This mismatch matters because deep uncertainty demands exploring multiple approaches and building flexibility. Morocco concentrated decision-making in one institution with one hierarchy and one set of procedures.

The consequences extend beyond immediate response. When primarily Ministry of Interior appointees manage decisions, they accumulate experience and build relationships with communities while elected local officials remain peripheral to the process. This limits opportunities for local institutions to develop crisis management capacity. Each disaster that follows a similar pattern reinforces the same institutional arrangement, making distributed capacity more difficult to build over time (Roe, 1998; Stirling, 1999).

This raises an interesting question about Morocco's process of decentralisation. Morocco had formally decentralised years before the earthquake struck. The 2011 Constitution and the 2015 regionalisation reforms explicitly established local elected authorities as the primary responders, endowing them with designated competencies and budgets. So why did the earthquake response rely so heavily on centralised control? To understand this apparent contradiction, we need to examine how Morocco's decentralisation process unfolded and which institutional patterns persisted beneath the surface of the reforms.

2. History and Background of Moroccan Decentralization

Morocco's decentralization unfolded gradually and was tightly controlled, rather than involving a linear transfer of power. The first regional reforms of the early 1970s established regions primarily as administrative and planning units lacking elected bodies, fiscal autonomy, and independent decision-making authority. While the 1976 Municipal Charter

formally recognized elected local governance for the first time, meaningful authority remained concentrated at the center.

During the 1990s and 2000s, decentralization reforms expanded the institutional landscape without fundamentally altering power relations. Regions and municipalities were granted limited competencies, particularly in development planning and economic promotion, but these reforms emphasized program implementation over political autonomy, with financial resources and strategic decision-making remaining under strong central oversight.

A more visible shift occurred after 2010, driven by the work of the Consultative Regionalisation Committee and the formal recognition of decentralization in the 2011 Constitution, further reinforced by the introduction of elected regional presidents with designated budgets in 2015 (CCR, 2011; OECD, 2018a). Despite these changes, decentralization has remained selective and differentiated, combining new regional institutions with enduring mechanisms of central control.

The 2011 constitutional change came after the Arab Spring protests, notably the February 20 Movement[1], which intensified demands for social and economic justice and democratic reforms, particularly to address deep regional inequalities and the concentration of power in urban centers (Bergh, 2021, p. 489). In response, King Mohammed VI introduced constitutional reforms to advance regionalization, enhancing regional authority in development planning while respecting other local governments. The reforms established local self-governance with accountability mechanisms and financial autonomy, created elected regional councils whose presidents can execute decisions, clarified local competencies as own, shared, and transferable, and encouraged inter-municipal cooperation (Royaume du Maroc, 2011).

Since 2015, Morocco has advanced regionalization by dividing the country into 12 regions led by Royal-appointed Governors (*Walis*), with each region further subdivided into prefectures and provinces managed by Governors and elected regional and local councils. Two distinct responsibility structures are deployed: an elective structure composed of regional, provincial and prefectural, and communal councils; and an administrative structure composed of the network of authority agents—governors, pachas and caids—who are part of the Ministry of Interior.

The Advanced Regionalization reform legally granted elected regional assemblies broader competencies in areas such as economic development, vocational training, rural development, and spatial planning (Gattioui, 2018). However, the principle of subsidiarity enshrined in the 2011 Constitution was not fully operationalized in the 2015 Organic Law on the Regions (Law 111-14). Instead, the Ministry of the Interior, through its appointed

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[1] The February 20 Movement (*Mouvement du 20 février*) was a Moroccan protest movement launched in early 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring, calling for political reforms, social justice, and an end to corruption.

walis, retained substantial tutelle[2] powers, including approval rights over all budgetary and spending decisions (Art. 116), which many observers see as a mechanism of continued central control (Bergh, 2016; Houdret & Harnisch, 2019).

While budgetary authority nominally shifted to the elected regional presidents, in practice their discretion depends heavily on political alignment and relations with the governor and central authorities (Hadrani, 2019). Furthermore, the indirect election of regional presidents by council members has fostered behind-the-scenes negotiations, often resulting in leadership that does not reflect direct electoral outcomes. For instance, despite the Justice and Development Party (PJD) winning the most seats in 2015, it controls only two regions, with many presidencies going to the regime-loyal Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM)through national-level party alliances (Houdret & Harnisch, 2019; Tafra, 2017).

3. Morocco's Centralization Challenges

Despite these reforms, significant spatial inequalities continue to affect Morocco. The OECD (2018a, pp. 5, 22) reports that 60 percent of Morocco's population of 34 million reside in urban areas, which account for 75 percent of the country's total GDP. Casablanca alone, with approximately 5 million inhabitants, contributes nearly 29 percent of the national GDP. In contrast, rural regions experience higher rates of poverty, lower levels of education and healthcare access, and suffer from inadequate infrastructure. Agriculture remains the primary source of employment in these areas, representing 80 percent of rural jobs.

In February 2025, the National Coordination of Al Haouz Earthquake (la Coordination Nationale des Victimes du Séisme d'Al Haouz)[3] renewed protests after months of government inaction, demanding fair compensation, strict enforcement of royal directives, an independent investigation into aid distribution, and an end to the exclusionary and fragmented reconstruction process (Yabiladi, 2025). Similar discontent emerged in Aït Bouguemez in July 2025, where over a thousand residents from 27 villages marched to demand basic infrastructure, healthcare, and flood protection after repeated failed attempts to meet the provincial governor (Morocco World News, 2025).

These episodes reveal how centralized control undermines local governance. Residents bypassed elected local representatives entirely, taking grievances to the streets or attempting to reach Ministry-appointed governors. Genuine local budgetary authority over reconstruction and decision-making power over infrastructure would have provided institutional channels to address these demands, rather than forcing communities into

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[2] Tutelle refers to the administrative oversight exercised by the central state over local authorities, including approval, suspension, and annulment powers over subnational decisions.
[3] The *Coordination of Al Haouz Victims* is a group formed by villagers in October 2023 in Amezmiz to protest the slow and unequal government aid following Morocco's deadly earthquake. It organized local communities to demand fair support for rebuilding homes and lives in their destroyed community, before the arrest of its leader, Said Ait Mahdi, in December 2024.

protest. Instead, centralization created an accountability gap: local officials cannot act while distant authorities remain unresponsive, perpetuating cycles of mobilization and distrust.

The institutional landscape for regional planning in Morocco illustrates a persistent tension between the formal empowerment of regional councils and the central government's enduring control. Since the first regional elections in 2015, councils have been tasked with preparing budgets and six-year Regional Development Plans (RDPs) intended to address local needs. In practice, however, these plans require Ministry of the Interior approval and often propose investment levels beyond regional means (El Aissi, 2018), limiting their effectiveness. Institutions created to strengthen execution, such as Regional Project Implementation Agencies (AREPs), frequently compete with centrally controlled Regional Development Agencies while Regional Investment Centres remain under the governor's authority and have been described as "empty shells" (Hallaoui, 2018).

The planning system is further weakened by overlapping instruments including RDPs, Regional Spatial Planning Schemes, and national sectoral strategies which often sideline local priorities in favor of state-led or donor-driven projects (OECD, 2018a). Flagship programs such as the INDH and the National Program on Social and Territorial Disparities, though partly funded by regional budgets, are initiated and directed by the central government (Bergh, 2012; Marei et al., 2018), leaving regional councils with little discretion over local development. Without authority over provinces and communes, and with fiscal resources far smaller than those controlled by central agencies or state-owned enterprises (CESE, 2016), regional councils operate in a fragmented environment.

Following the Al Hoceima earthquake of 2004, the country adopted a more proactive approach to disaster risk management, strengthening key institutions and introducing early warning systems. These institutional responses occurred prior to Morocco's formal decentralization reforms. Notable initiatives include the creation of the Monitoring and Coordination Centre (CVC) and the Fund for Combating the Effects of Natural Disasters (FNCL) in 2008, as well as the reinforcement of the General Directorate of Civil Protection (DGPC). All of these institutions were established three years before the 2011 constitutional reforms and seven years before the 2015 Organic Law on Regions, consolidating centralized control over disaster response.

Morocco also aligned its policies with international standards by adhering to the OECD Recommendation on the Governance of Critical Risks in 2015 and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction from 2015 to 2030. This resulted in the Government Programme for the Integrated Management of Natural Disaster Risks, as well as the creation of the Solidarity Fund against Catastrophic Events (FSEC) in 2016. These measures culminated in the National Disaster Risk Management Strategy 2020–2030 (SNGRCN), which officially emphasizes concerted, inclusive and participatory governance, as well as a culture of prevention.

In practice, however, the SNGRCN places the Ministry of the Interior at the center of disaster management through the Directorate for Natural Risk Management (DGRN), created in 2020. The DGRN coordinates between central departments and local authorities, including *walis*, governors, and prefects, but this coordination is largely hierarchical rather than genuinely collaborative. Despite official rhetoric of participatory governance, the Ministry of Interior's dominance creates structural barriers to genuine decentralization in disaster management.

4. The Moroccan Ministry of the Interior: Colonial Legacies and Institutional Continuities

Morocco's Ministry of the Interior is the product of a century-long consolidation of power. Its origins lie in the French Protectorate (1912-1955), when a centralized security apparatus was designed to maintain tight control over territory and populations. Preserved almost intact after independence in 1956, this apparatus became the backbone of the Moroccan state's administrative capacity. Over the decades, the ministry expanded far beyond its policing mandate, transforming into the monarchy's principal instrument for shaping politics, monitoring society, and managing territory. This institutional legacy explains why the Ministry today possesses unrivaled authority across disparate fields: from security and elections to development policy and disaster management. The foundations trace back to the French Protectorate, when the Police Chérifienne was established as a centralized security apparatus modeled on the French metropolitan system, divided into specialized branches: urban policing, judicial enforcement, and intelligence (Badier, 2023).

When Morocco gained independence in 1956, the newly sovereign state chose continuity over reform. Rather than dismantling or restructuring this colonial apparatus, Moroccan authorities preserved its essential features and expanded its capabilities (Smolin, 2013; Badier, 2023). The creation of the Direction Générale de la Sûreté Nationale (DGSN) on May 16, 1956 exemplified this strategic choice. Although the Ministry of the Interior was nominally handed to the nationalist Istiqlal party, real control over security affairs remained firmly within the royal cabinet. The DGSN's early years (1956-1960) saw the retention of French advisors and the integration of auxiliary forces, which blurred the lines between police and military functions (Badier, 2023). This dual police-military structure created an extensive intelligence-gathering system that became the regime's primary mechanism for collecting information, monitoring threats, and reducing political uncertainty.

This structural and operational continuity facilitated the ministry's emergence as the backbone of Morocco's internal security and political control particularly during the so-called years of lead (1960s-1990s) (Vairel, 2021). Under King Hassan II, the ministry became the primary instrument for neutralizing political opposition, surveilling civil society, and ensuring the absolute dominance of the monarchy over all other political actors (Monjib,

1992). The DGSN, working alongside the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (DST), Morocco's domestic intelligence agency, developed extensive networks of informants and employed tactics ranging from arbitrary arrests to forced disappearances. The ministry's reach extended beyond mere repression to encompass electoral manipulation (Badier, 2023).

The ministry's role as the "nerve center of the Makhzen" reached its zenith under Driss Basri, who served as Minister of the Interior from 1979 to 1999. Basri transformed the institution and his tenure was marked by the suppression of leftist and Islamist opposition, tight control over the press, and the orchestration of elections to guarantee outcomes favorable to the palace (Hibou, 2011). The ministry's regional administrators (*walis* and provincial governors) acted as the monarchy's local agents (Bergh, 2016). Basri's *administration territoriale* system entrenched a culture of hierarchical control where all significant decisions required central approval. Despite Basri's dismissal in 1999 following the ascension of King Mohammed VI, the ministry's fundamental mechanisms of control persisted, albeit in more modernized and less overtly repressive forms. More significantly for disaster governance, in the post 1999-era the ministry's role as the primary coordinator and decision-maker during crises became institutionalized, reflecting its unique combination of territorial presence, information-gathering capacity, and direct access to royal authority.

This historical trajectory directly shapes how Morocco responds to disasters today. When the 2023 Al Haouz earthquake struck, it was institutionally inevitable that the Ministry of Interior would assume primary responsibility for coordinating the response. The ministry's century-long monopoly over crisis management and coordination, and territorial control made it the obvious choice for earthquake response, regardless of formal decentralization policies that theoretically empowered local authorities.

5. Empirical Insights from Al Haouz

This empirical analysis draws on two key sources. The first is a recent study, *Evaluating the Moroccan Government's Response to the Al Haouz Earthquake* (2025), conducted by researchers Youssef Malhouni and Charif Mabrouki from the University of Settat. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining analysis of official government measures with a substantial field component involving 150 interviews carried out in several of the most severely affected communes in Al Haouz province. The second is a comprehensive one-year study on disaster management conducted by l'Observatoire, part of Transparency Morocco (2024), which provides detailed analysis of the governance mechanisms and local-level implementation challenges of the reconstruction program.

The findings reveal a dual dynamic. On one hand, the Moroccan state demonstrated a capacity for rapid mobilization of significant resources. Within days of the earthquake, the Royal Armed Forces were deployed, emergency medical units were operational, and an interministerial commission was established under the coordination of the Ministry of the

Interior (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2025, pp. 14-15). Respondents credited the monarchy and military with providing decisive and visible leadership during this initial phase, with satisfaction levels exceeding 80 percent in some surveyed areas.

On the other hand, the study documented persistent structural weaknesses in disaster governance. Local elected officials were consistently evaluated poorly, with a majority of respondents indicating that they had little to no contact with municipal authorities in the early weeks of the crisis. Civil society organizations, by contrast, received positive evaluations from over 70 percent of respondents, reflecting their ability to act quickly and directly address community needs, even in the absence of formal coordination with the state.

The study also examined the government's reconstruction and aid programs, which were officially framed as a comprehensive, multi-year recovery plan. Key measures included direct financial compensation of 140,000 MAD for complete reconstruction of collapsed homes and 80,000 MAD for partially damaged structures, temporary housing subsidies for displaced families, and targeted support for affected farmers and small businesses (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2025, p. 16). However, many rural households reported delays in receiving payments, uncertainty about eligibility criteria, and a lack of transparency in the prioritization of reconstruction projects.

These delays reflected structural governance problems: Local Reconstruction Commissions conducted expedited two-person inspections without the meaningful participation of elected officials, all commission decisions remained unpublished, and neither civil society nor disaster victims had any representation in the process. The centralization of information at the local authority level meant affected populations could not access basic information about eligibility determinations or prioritization criteria (L'Observatoire du Programme de reconstruction post-séisme du Grand Atlas, 2024, p. 48). This lack of equity created widespread feelings of frustration, anger, and indignation among the disaster-affected populations (L'Observatoire du Programme de reconstruction post-séisme du Grand Atlas, 2024, p. 23).

Geographic disparities in program outcomes were significant. In certain mountainous communes, fewer than 40 percent of respondents expressed satisfaction with the speed, fairness, and adequacy of aid (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2025, p. 17). These disparities were linked not only to logistical constraints such as damaged access roads, but also to the centralized design of the programs, which left little room for local adaptation or community input.

The post-earthquake governance structure revealed significant problems with democratic decentralization, as appointed local authority agents dominated decision-making at the expense of elected representatives. In Morocco's dual governance system, elected commune councils coexist with Ministry of Interior-appointed authority agents (governors, and their subordinates such as moqaddems and caids) who represent the central state at the local level. The Local Reconstruction Commissions (CLR), central to the reconstruction process, had a

composition heavily skewed toward appointed authority and security members (3), administration (2), with only one elected official and one technician. In practice, CLR visits were often reduced to just two people conducting expeditive house inspections, leading to what residents described as marginalization of elected officials and a predominant role of the local authority representative. As one civil society actor from Chichaoua province observed: the role of elected officials was limited to formal participation in construction census commissions, for which the final word remained with the representative of the interior authority agent (Moqaddem) (L'Observatoire du Programme de reconstruction post-séisme du Grand Atlas, 2024, p. 23).This governance structure excluded any representation from civil society or disaster victims themselves, while all commission decisions remained unpublished (L'Observatoire du Programme de reconstruction post-séisme du Grand Atlas, 2024).

The results illustrate how Moroccan disaster governance remains rooted in a centralized model that treats uncertainty as a problem to be contained through hierarchical control rather than adaptive collaboration. System uncertainty was addressed by concentrating authority in central agencies, sidelining local actors from strategic decisions (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2025, pp. 20-21). Outcome uncertainty was managed through standardized aid schemes ignoring differentiated community needs (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2025, pp. 18-19). Preference uncertainty, referring to differences in priorities and expectations between the state and affected populations, was largely unacknowledged, as neither local governance structures nor civil society organizations were meaningfully integrated into program design or monitoring (Malhouni & Mabrouki, 2025, p. 20).

Malhouni and Mabrouki (2025, p. 22) conclude that while the Moroccan state's response was operationally effective in certain dimensions and programmatically ambitious, it reproduced longstanding patterns of political fragility. By framing the earthquake as a logistical and financial challenge rather than a governance opportunity, the government missed the chance to build trust, strengthen local capacity, and develop adaptive, participatory mechanisms for recovery. These findings reinforce the central argument: disasters in Morocco are not merely moments when fragility is revealed, they are moments when it may be actively reproduced through the political management of uncertainty.

6. Comparative Perspectives: Türkiye's Earthquake

Türkiye's 2023 earthquake response reveals how centralized systems manage deep uncertainty through political rather than adaptive strategies. Helena Hermansson's analysis (2019) of cross-sectoral collaboration demonstrates that information exclusion stems from calculated political choices, not mere institutional incapacity. Drawing on 44 interviews with officials, NGOs, and local leaders, her research illustrates how political polarization helped transform local knowledge from an operational resource into a threat to state political legitimacy. In Türkiye's paternalistic political culture, citizens expect the state to

independently manage disasters; collaborating with politically incompatible actors, particularly the Kurdish-affiliated BDP municipal government in Van, risked appearing as state failure and ceding political credit to the opposition. State authorities feared that relying on municipal expertise would undermine their own credibility with their support base and suggest they were incapable of fulfilling their duties.

Türkiye's response is a prime example of Stirling's concept of manufactured uncertainty: the authorities artificially increased manageable uncertainty to justify centralised control. In Van, for example, the governorate disregarded municipal engineers' warnings about unsafe buildings due to this political distrust, which led to the collapse of a hotel that killed 25 people (Hermansson, 2019, p. 1062; Hürriyet Daily News, Nov 13, 2011). This represents a classic authority-legitimacy trap from the OECD framework: faced with system uncertainty about local actors and competing political priorities, state authorities preserved political legitimacy over operational capacity. Rather than risk appearing dependent on political rivals, they rejected expertise that could have saved lives.

Elected neighborhood leaders with real-time community data were barred from Crisis Coordination Centers, forcing aid distribution to proceed blindly (Hermansson, 2019, p.1066). This exemplifies how fragile states sacrifice capacity and legitimacy to maintain hierarchical authority, creating recursive cycles that perpetuate fragility. Instead of building adaptive capacity through distributed knowledge, authorities amplified unpredictability to justify exclusion.

Both cases demonstrate how centralized systems respond to disasters by deliberately obscuring who knows what and whose needs matter most, using political exclusion to amplify confusion rather than reduce it. Türkiye's selective collaboration represented attempts to manage uncertainty at Level 3, allowing some actors deemed politically safe to participate. Search-and-rescue NGOs gained access because they posed limited policy threats, while municipal authorities remained excluded due to political incompatibility.

While Türkiye's response was characterised by a political rejection of locally held knowledge, Morocco's response involved the central state monopolising and withholding information from local authorities. In the former case, ignorance stemmed from a refusal to listen, whereas in the latter case it stemmed from information deprivation. Unlike Türkiye, which eventually incorporated some local knowledge, in Morocco absolute information asymmetry persisted throughout the crisis. Türkiye's approach pushed uncertainty to Level 4, while Morocco's restriction of information networks reached Level 5, which is characterised by recognized ignorance. Both approaches confirm that disasters can become laboratories for reproducing fragility, transforming uncertainty from a management challenge into a political instrument. While Türkiye's selective adaptation retained some learning capacity, Morocco's centralised approach eliminated feedback mechanisms entirely, creating deeper structural vulnerabilities that compound over time.

7. Discussion

The 2023 Al Haouz earthquake reveals how centralized governance systems transform crises into mechanisms for reproducing state fragility. This analysis contributes to existing literature by proposing that centralized disaster responses actively reproduce institutional weaknesses through the systematic exclusion of local actors. Despite formal decentralization reforms, the Ministry of Interior monopolized disaster response in practice, sidelining legally empowered local authorities and creating a cycle that left the state vulnerable to future shocks. Fragility persists not through state absence but through forms of endogenous state presence that undermine resilience.

Morocco's response mirrors Türkiye's 2023 earthquake, where centralized systems prioritized bureaucratic control over local expertise. The Authority-Legitimacy-Capacity framework illuminates how channeling all decision-making through a single institution prevents states from strengthening their broader institutional fabric. Both cases demonstrate that disasters present moments where states either reinforce existing power structures or embrace transformation; Morocco and Türkiye chose the former.

The exclusion of local deputies represents a strategic error. These actors possess irreplaceable knowledge of community vulnerabilities, social networks, and geographic specificities that central authorities cannot replicate. Each crisis represents a learning laboratory: empowering local actors with resources, authority, and decision-making power allows them to gain experience that strengthens the entire governance system. States that build distributed capacity become inherently less fragile because they don't depend on singular institutional pathways.

The persistence of centralized control stems from the Ministry of Interior's unique institutional position. This institution has evolved into both the repository of state capacity and the guardian of centralized control, creating a structural trap. As simultaneously the security apparatus and crisis management authority, the Ministry has institutional incentives to maintain centralization rather than develop alternative governance mechanisms. This dual role creates a fundamental conflict where building local capacity threatens organizational primacy and directly perpetuates fragility: the institution controlling security also controls crisis response, treating disasters as threats to manage rather than opportunities to build local governance capacity. Each crisis strengthens the Ministry while starving local institutions of the experience needed for resilience, locking Morocco into a cycle where centralization breeds more centralization. Breaking this cycle requires crisis management pathways independent of the security apparatus.

Meaningful decentralization demands more than legal frameworks; it requires redistributing crisis management capabilities and allowing local institutions to learn through practice. This involves creating mechanisms that compel central authorities to work through local actors:

mandating local participation in damage assessment, channeling aid through municipal authorities, and establishing feedback systems that capture ground-level knowledge.

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