

## **Award Ceremony of the 2023 North-South Prize of the Council of Europe** **Speech by Amina Bouayach**

Your Excellency, President of the Portuguese Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa,

Your Excellency, President of the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic, José Pedro Aguiar-Branco,

Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Bjørn Berge,

Chair of the Executive Committee of the North-South Centre, Ambassador Francesca Camilleri Vettiger,

Honorable members of the Portuguese Parliament (and European Parliament),

My fellow laureates from the Global Campus of Human Rights, Judge Verónica Gómez and Mr Manfred Nowak

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with immense gratitude and profound humility that I stand before you today to accept the North-South Prize. I extend my thanks to the Council of Europe and the North-South Centre for this great distinction.

The honor you bestow upon me today is not merely a recognition of my individual efforts in defending human rights, but, I believe, a testament to the substantial progress made by my country in promoting dignity and freedom.

This honor holds particular significance for me as it coincides with the 20th anniversary of the creation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission. As you may know, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission represents a pioneering example of transitional justice in the Arab and Muslim world. Through its focus on community reparation, its gender approach, and effective compensation of victims of past severe human rights violations, it constitutes a unique experience worldwide.

This fundamental step in constructing the rule of law in Morocco has also laid the foundation for a distinctly Moroccan approach to human rights. This approach is characterized by constant interaction between civil society and the state and is marked by three key elements: (i) consensus among all stakeholders rather than compromise, (ii) innovation in developing the most suitable responses to the national context, and (iii) inclusiveness of all actors, in a participatory approach that includes the 12 regions of the Kingdom.

Owing to this approach, a recommendation from civil society for the establishment of a truth commission was adopted by the Consultative Council on Human Rights, precursor to the National Human Rights Council, which I have the honor of chairing. This recommendation was subsequently enacted at the highest echelons of the state by His Majesty King Mohammed VI. In a similar vein, the reform of the family code would not have been possible without His Majesty's federating vision, which transformed societal hesitation about women's rights and gender equality into a decisive and unparalleled achievement in the region. It is thanks to this same royal vision that Morocco is about to reform its family code for the second time in 20 years, and that the historic decision to open the profession of *adoul*, a Muslim notary, to women was possible.

The dialogue between civil society and various institutional actors has facilitated the implementation of the principles and values of the international human rights system in a manner that is both adapted and timely, leading to their gradual acceptance and proliferation across society. Civil society, by driving this normative process, fosters the internalization of human rights principles and the transition to public action by the relevant actors.

Moreover, this normative human rights process is not unidirectional but multidirectional, as evidenced by Morocco's significant progress in the fight against torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment. The national campaign of 20 Moroccan NGOs, which I had the chance to coordinate, for the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT), and whose National Prevention Mechanism was established within the National Human Rights Council in 2019, was partly based on an institutional recommendation from the Equity and Reconciliation Commission. Today, the partnership between the National Human Rights Council and the General Directorate for National Security in this area, in addition to our periodic training program with the Royal Gendarmerie, can be considered unique.

It is this same institutional approach that we wish to extend to all National Human Rights Institutions in Africa, with the creation of the African Network of National Preventive Mechanisms for Torture Prevention last year in Marrakech, and whose permanent secretariat will be based in Morocco.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The successful implementation of structural Human Rights reforms within my country is a testament to the collective effort of all involved. The establishment of the Rule of Law is a societal project that engages entire nations. It should neither be perceived as an inescapable end nor an obligatory restriction. It is a voluntary and sovereign choice that must delicately balance progress and equality, development and democracy.

This balance is at the heart of the Moroccan approach to human rights I've described an approach we continually strive to uphold and enhance. In addressing the challenge of translating De Jure Rights, as enshrined in over a third of the 180 articles of our Constitution, into De Facto Rights, the Moroccan human rights approach is committed to finding suitable and tailored solutions. These solutions, while considering specific circumstances and dynamics, aim to ensure that everyone can effectively exercise their universal rights. The challenge for all nations, particularly those in the Global South, lies in the effectiveness of these rights. I firmly believe that the establishment of the Rule of Law cannot be realized without building a state that not only guarantees its citizens' rights but also actively advocates for their freedoms and interests. Foremost among these rights is the Right to Life.

Excellencies, Honorable guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The multiplication and globalization of challenges cannot in any way undermine our commitment to Human Rights, especially the Right to Life, this original, supreme, and absolute right, to which all other rights are subordinate and from which all other rights derive. In a world striving towards not just humanism, but humanity itself, any infringement of this Right is unacceptable. Neither the death penalty nor the atrocities of conflict can be justified or overlooked.

In this world more divided and polarized than ever, between the Global South and the Global North, initiatives like the North-South Prize must serve as an example. Armed with the conviction that we are all equal, it is incumbent upon us to remind those who may have forgotten that Life is the most precious thing.

As we commemorate the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, I seize upon this illustrious occasion to underscore our shared responsibility. Rooted in our collective history and age-old traditions of harmonious coexistence, we must strive towards a unified commitment to our shared values of equality, solidarity, and non-discrimination.

In closing, I would like to sincerely thank the Portuguese people and their representatives for warmly welcoming us to the Palácio de São Bento, a symbol of Portugal's rich history.

This is the second time I have been inside this magnificent building. The first time, I accompanied a man whom I am honoured to humbly call my co-laureate, a man who taught me a great deal about the value of collective action and the importance of objectivity, rigor, and ethics in our work, a man who also stood here when he received this prestigious award, Mr. Abderrahmane Youssoufi, may he rest in peace.

He was the first Moroccan to receive this award, followed by my dear friend, Mr. André Azoulay, whose constant commitment to the dialogue of cultures should serve as an inspiration to us all.

In conclusion, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone present for allowing me the honor of sharing insights from my journey as a Moroccan human rights advocate. This work is not merely a profession, but for me, it is a calling that resonates with my very existence, an ethos that requires discipline, resolve, and humility. It is rooted in a profound belief in the shared humanity of all and the conviction that Dignity, Justice, and Equality are our collective destiny.

Thank you.