

MOROCCO: POPULAR MOBILIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

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Introduction

During the past decade, sustained actions of protest in different parts of Morocco have been expressed through peaceful means. Popular mobilization occurs mainly outside informal spaces of participation, online and offline. Moroccans mobilize as groups of different kinds (as social movements, informal groups, professional groups, or simply as people). They make demands in response to both governmental action and inaction, for example against social exclusion or in favor of more rights for a particular social or professional group.

While different issues trigger popular mobilization, it is very much related to a general sense of outrage among different social groups and classes. Mobilization finds its roots in the expectations of different social groups concerning how the state should treat them. Myriad issues and diverse actors drove the mobilizations. However, they all converge around social and economic rights, more civil liberties, and more democracy and social justice.

Frequent popular mobilization means that the power of existing structures and agencies is questioned and that there is a risk of instability. In Morocco, despite continuous protest actions, the regime has been able to maintain its power and to stabilize its rule through different tactics such as reform, cooptation and repression. The capacity of the regime to adapt to new situations reveals the nature of the power structure and the process of political change underway.

Popular Mobilization in Context

Recent popular mobilizations in Morocco are the result of a process that started years ago. Since the 1990s, Moroccans, especially youths, have expressed dissent by occupying public space and by becoming active in grassroots movements and associations. The measures adopted by the regime in order to enlarge the sphere of political participation and to ensure

more freedom of expression had a limited impact on engagement through institutional politics. Membership in political parties remains very weak and abstention reached its peak in the 2007 legislative elections (37% of registered voters).

The level of mistrust vis-à-vis various political institutions is high. A recent survey conducted among young Moroccans shows that 87% and 82% of them have a little or no trust in political parties and in parliament respectively.¹ The mistrust in political institutions affects their capacity to play an intermediary function. As a result, citizens are aware of the limits of their influence through formal politics. Thus, grievances and demands are largely expressed outside existing parties and unions.

Popular mobilization is also the result of discontent with state policies in different fields. Despite the efforts made by the regime to reform different sectors, social and spatial inequalities persist. Policies in the fields of education, employment, health, justice and housing suffer from a number of deficiencies. Moreover, there is a widespread perception that the government is unable to deal efficiently with the problems that Moroccans are faced with on a daily basis. The slow pace of reforms and dissatisfaction with politicians and officials create frustration and plant the seeds of social unrest. While there is variation in the channels through which Moroccans voice their discontent and try to influence policies and change, protest actions are serving more and more as a vital form of political expression.

The Drivers of Protest: Myriad Issues and Forms

During the past decade, Moroccans have mobilized around different issues and have expressed their demands through diverse means. Marches have been organized in different cities for the right to employment. In 2010, thousands of Sahrawi pitched tents and stayed for weeks in a desert area near by Laâyoun in order to denounce their social and economic conditions (Gdeim Izik camp).

Since 2011, villagers from Imider, located in the Atlas Mountains 200 miles from Marrakech, protested against reduced access to water, the intensifying depletion of groundwater, and soil contamination by the mine. The villagers set up a camp and closed a pipeline supplying water to the largest silver mine in Africa owned by the Société Nationale d'Investissement (SNI), a private holding company which belongs to the royal family. Since then, villagers have occupied the valve on a semi-permanent basis in order to secure access to water and farming again.

The most important social mobilization in decades took place during the so called "Arab Spring"

¹ ZERHOUNI, SALOUA, "Explaining Youth Participation and Non-Participation in Morocco", *Power2Youth Working Papers*, No. 36, May 2017.

in 2011. Indeed, a group of online activists organized themselves into what was called the 20th February Movement (M20) and led calls for nationwide protests to denounce corruption and despotism. Approximately 150,000 to 200,000 Moroccans in 53 cities across the country went to the streets and demanded major democratic reforms including the reform of the constitution. Dignity, freedom and social justice were also part of their demands.

For the first time in the political history of the country, Moroccans contested the King's decision to grant amnesty to a Spanish pedophile (Daniel Galván) in August 2013. Galván was convicted of raping 11 children ranged in age from 4 to 14. The protests were organized throughout the country, not only against Galván's release but also against issues involving the increase of sexual tourism and child abuse.

Protests erupted in the marginalized region of the Rif in October 2016, following the death of fishmonger Mouhcine Fikri, who was crushed inside a rubbish truck while trying to take back fish that was confiscated by the police. The so-called Hirak Rif rose against economic and social exclusion and demanded improvements in the infrastructure, jobs for unemployed youths, building universities and hospitals, and more economic reforms.

For reasons related to social exclusion, thousands of Moroccans mobilized in Jerada in 2017, a small city in the northeast of Morocco and which was economically dependent upon a mine that the state closed 20 years ago. The protestors were critical of the government's neglect of their city and growing poverty. During the same year, the inhabitants of the city of Zagora, a town in southeastern Morocco, led peaceful demonstrations to demand clean drinking water following a series of service interruptions for hours.

In 2018, Moroccans organized a boycott campaign of unprecedented scale by using social media networks. The main three companies targeted were Sidi Ali, a producer of mineral water, Afriquia gas stations and Danone with its brand of milk. The campaign denounced the high prices of products and revived criticism of the links between power and wealth in Morocco. The supporters of the movement were critical of the linkages between the aforementioned companies and the government.

Demands are expressed both from the margins and in the center. While the M20 had a national dimension, most of the protest actions that took place during the past decade had to do with local/regional or sectoral demands. Moroccans mobilize spontaneously, yet there is a growing capacity to coordinate peaceful and lasting protest actions. With the 2011 uprisings, the Hirak Rif and the boycott campaign, the "street" as well as virtual and artistic spheres have served as spaces of political expression. Social media and the internet have been used to mobilize and coordinate protest.

Regardless of the diversity of issues, what unites the different protestors is a common aspiration for social inclusion. The multiple protest actions show that there is less fear of the authorities and an emerging active citizenship.

The Regime's Maintenance Strategies

Monarchical endurance in Morocco is related to its capacity to adapt to new situations and challenges without changing the power structure. The monarchy is the center around which different political actors coalesce. Despite different constitutional reforms, the monarchy maintains important executive powers. Historically speaking, the reaction of the regime to potential challengers very often vacillated between the adoption of reforms, cooptation, intimidation and repression. The dosage and timing of each tactic depends on the actors involved, the nature of their demands, the stakes at play and the degree of mobilization.

For instance, the first three decades of King Hassan's reign were characterized by more repression and limited reforms. There was a dozen mass political trials and violent suppression of major urban insurrections that took place in Morocco. Cooptation was used by King Hassan, but to a lesser extent, to buy out influential non-violent adversaries and to reward supporters within the political elites.

During the last decade of King Hassan's rule, reform as a tactic of regime maintenance prevailed. Progress was made in the field of human rights, and the sphere of political participation became more inclusive. The King invited the head of the opposition party USFP to form a government of *alternance*. The Islamists of Al-Islah-wa-Tawhid² were allowed to integrate an existing party close to the Palace (MPCD) and to run for legislative elections in 1997. For many observers, the reforms adopted aimed at preparing a smooth succession and did not influence the democratic transition process.

King Mohammed VI has used similar tactics of adaptation. During the first 15 years of his rule, the introduction of liberal reforms prevailed. Following the 2011 uprisings, a new constitution was adopted and the sphere of human rights and public liberties was enlarged. The powers of the parliament were reinforced and the judiciary became more independent.

However, the regime has also used repression to silence critical voices and to absorb social unrest. For instance, different protest actions have been violently repressed by the government: Gdeim Izig, the marches against the King's amnesty of the Spanish pedophile, the Hirak Rif and protests in Jerada. Protestors were arrested and some of their leaders were subject to

² One of the main Islamist movements in Morocco and largely excluded from institutional politics despite its attempts to create a political party.

“conditions tantamount to torture” in solitary confinement, as stated by Amnesty International for the case of Nasser Zefzafi, the leader of the Hirak Rif. Despite dialogues with the government, contractual teachers have also been confronted with state repression.

Monarchical resilience is a complex and dynamic process. The regime’s ability to combine different tactics to adapt to challenging situations without making changes in the power structure could be considered as one of the main elements of regime maintenance in Morocco.

Conclusion

The regime has been successful in weakening the M20 and the Hirak Rif, and controlling other protest actions. However, Moroccans continue to organize sit-ins and demonstrations, and to sign petitions to express their disenchantment with state policies and politicians. Morocco is confronted with many of the problems that have led to revolts and instability in other countries of the MENA region. The country has a high rate of youth unemployment (30% of Morocco’s urban youths are unemployed), problems stemming from corruption at all levels, and largely discredited political institutions. Without addressing these deficits, frustration might create anger and lead to social unrest, violence and radicalization.

The persistent social mobilization around various social, economic and political issues shows that Moroccans’ expectations are high and that in the current conjuncture, the regime cannot stay ahead of the growing curve of demands. Despite the regime having extensive experience in dealing with formal and informal opposition groups – be they from the left or from the Islamist currents – it will likely face difficulties in dealing with loosely organized movements that have recourse to forms that escape the sphere of state control, such as has been the case with the boycott campaign. Unless the regime creates mechanisms to channel popular claims and present the Moroccans with real reforms, mobilizations might grow rapidly and uncontrollably.

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