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What Protest in Morocco Reveals about Public Trust in Political Parties

Mohammed Masbah

Associate Fellow, Chatham House, London
Director, Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, Rabat

The ongoing wave of social and political protests sparked in Morocco during October 2016 demonstrates the increased frustration among citizens over the country's political course in the past few years. Popular mobilization (or *Hirak*) in the Rif as well as in other regions, such as Jerada in the far east of the country, was centred around demands for job creation and the development of much-needed infrastructure. Subsequently, it has grown in reaction to the Moroccan government's repressive actions against protesters, and it might expand even further if the protesters' grievances are not properly addressed.

Underlying the protesters' socio-economic grievances is a deep distrust in government politics and in the formal political process as a whole, as well as a feeling that the role of political parties as reliable mediators between state and society is eroding. This article describes how Moroccan authorities' conduct has contributed to deepening distrust in party politics, thus fuelling the ongoing protests in the country.

Between 2011 and 2016

The government's violent repression of the 2016 protests in the Rif, and later in other Moroccan regions, stands in stark contrast to its response to the 20 February Movement in 2011. At the time, the Moroccan monarchy launched a reform package that included both constitutional amendments and a political opening to absorb popular anger. Among the most significant amendments made to the 2011

constitution was the inclusion of articles guaranteeing public freedoms and the right to protest. The constitution also guarantees the right of citizens to propose legislation through petitions and sets limits on the monarchy's powers in appointing the Prime Minister and the cabinet while enhancing the powers of the Parliament. In addition, the regime's repression of the 20 February Movement protests was measured and proportional.

At the time, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which was then in opposition, benefitted from these changes, and was quickly propelled to the helm of the government following the 2011 legislative elections. Its leader Abdelilah Benkirane was named Prime Minister, leading his party into consecutive electoral gains in the 2015 local and 2016 parliamentary elections.

However, since late 2013, the 2011 political opening has gradually closed again. Influenced by the regional political environment, including the anti-democratic developments in the Middle East, the election of President Trump in the United States, and pressure from some Gulf countries, and feeling threatened by the steady electoral gains of Islamist parties, the palace sought to strengthen the executive character of the monarchy by weakening the elected PJD government and galvanizing political parties loyal to the regime.

These actions further discredited the political process and weakened the role of both political parties and formal political institutions. The increased presence of the monarchy in daily politics has triggered doubts about the effectiveness of the elected government in solving socio-economic problems. The ongoing social and political protests are merely symptoms of the absence of the government's internal and external accountability, and its inefficiency in providing public services due to widespread corruption.

Political Void

One clear example of the absence of accountability in government can be found in the 'political deadlock' that lasted for over six months. In March 2017, King Mohammed VI dismissed Prime Minister-designate Abdelilah Benkirane after he failed to form a new government. Benkirane's failure was due to the non-cooperation of pro-palace parties. This led to the replacement of Benkirane by another PJD figure, Saad Eddine El Othmani, who was obliged to abide by the palace's conditions before being allowed to form his majority government. This move has not only weakened the PJD but also confirmed the palace as the most powerful institution in the country. It confirmed the idea that electoral results are not sufficient to create a government coalition without the palace's blessings. Moreover, the manipulation of political elites has discredited them in the eyes of citizens, leading to a leadership vacuum in political representation and distrust in the political process altogether.

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The protests in the Rif started during this period of political void in 2016 and 2017. While the palace was focusing on containing and weakening the PJD, protesters were able to occupy the streets and mount a resistance to state repression. Right after the 2016 election, the King left on a lengthy tour of African countries, in preparation for the return of Morocco to the African Union. In the meantime, Benkirane concerted his efforts on building

a governing coalition. As interim Prime Minister, his first goal was to form a government. In parallel, the palace was focused on getting rid of Benkirane.

Taking advantage of the political void, protesters in the Rif region seized the death of fish vendor Mouhssin Fikri - who was crushed inside a trash compactor when he tried to save his product from being confiscated by local authorities - to express their grievances. The protests began in late October 2016 with demands for justice and a thorough investigation of the death of Fikri, but evolved into socio-economic demands for jobs and infrastructure. As one protester stated to the media, "*there is only one reason behind the protests in the Rif and elsewhere in Morocco: the Hogra (injustice), the oppression, the marginalization and repression that is practiced on citizens in the Rif. The death of (the Martyr) Mouhssin Fikri was just the straw that broke the camel's back.*"¹

Because of their anger towards the ineffectiveness of the political parties, protesters refused to converse with government representatives as mediators between them and the regime. Instead, Rif protesters wanted direct contact with the King through a delegation of his choosing. In Jerada, protest leaders did meet with the government, but they also continued to protest, as they believed it was the only way to pressure the government into fulfilling its promises. The government's violent response to peaceful protests damaged any remaining trust protesters had in it.

The Monarchy's conduct has, intentionally or unintentionally, contributed to this result. In the summer of 2017, King Mohammed VI directly attacked political parties for not being credible.² Several months later he reiterated his criticism and promised a "political earthquake,"³ ultimately sacking several ministers and bureaucrats. This move has been praised by protesters as a show of goodwill to ascertain accountability. However, the continuous crackdown on peaceful protests and political activists has only eroded public faith in the authorities.

¹ "baada itlaki sarahihi.. ahad mu'takali al hirak yahki ma hadat" (After his release.. a Hirak detainee tell his story), Hespess, accessed 17 March, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5ZQMOWaz8>.

² "Royal Speech on the Occasion of the Throne Day," Maroc.ma, 31 July, 2017, www.maroc.ma/en/royal-speeches/full-text-royal-speech-occasion-throne-day.

³ "Full Text of HM the King's Speech at Parliament Opening," Maroc.ma, 13 October, 2017, www.maroc.ma/en/discours-royaux/texte-integral-prononce-par-sm-le-roi-mohammed-vi-devant-les-membres-des-deux.

Symptoms of Systematic Corruption?

The fact that the protests have endured, despite official promises, is a symptom of the public's deep distrust in politicians. The source of this distrust is the real and perceived injustices and systematic corruption in the country.

This feeling is not specific to the Rif region, but is spread across the country, especially among youth. For instance, a qualitative study conducted by the NDI after the 2011 election revealed that many Moroccan youth are extremely unsatisfied with the performance of political parties. They have only a very superficial knowledge of party ideologies or platforms, and little knowledge of elections and elected officials. More importantly, they identified unemployment as the most pressing issue facing the country. The government could lose credibility with the youth if it proves unable to reduce the high unemployment rate.⁴

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Added to that, the poor performance of public services - especially in health, education and the judiciary - has led to a flourishing of informal connections, known in the Middle East as 'Wasta,' which has, in turn, enhanced the perception of systemic corruption within the state bureaucracy. In fact, between 2008 and 2017 Morocco ranked between 80th and 90th in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, which might explain why trust in government and political parties is so low among Moroccans.⁵

In the marginalized areas where the protests took place, unemployment is the highest in the country, and the poor performance of public services is highly visible. For citizens living in these areas, political parties and local elected bodies have done little to improve their socio-economic situation. This has coincided with a decline in the legitimacy of traditional mediators such as local notables, political parties and labour unions, leading to the absence of viable interlocutors between society and the State, and creating a void now being filled by non-state and non-political actors.

Conclusion

Despite the regime's success at co-opting moderate Islamists, repressing radical elements and winning the acquiescence of political parties, a new generation of activists is emerging. Their evolution reflects both generational and cultural changes. The main challenge to the monarchy does not emanate from political parties or Islamists, but from street protests.

The State's response to these protests has not been based on a clear strategy, leading to confusion. The monarchy appears to have opted to not reproduce the same concessions as 2011, this time turning to repression to restore state 'reputation' (*Hibate dawla*) or 'fear,' while exploring indirect channels for negotiations with separate groups of protesters. In the absence of trust between the contenders, and in the absence of reliable mediators, it doesn't seem that an agreement between the protesters and the regime is forthcoming.

The Monarchy's policy decisions during this current political crisis will determine the future direction of the country's politics. With the failure of political parties to play intermediary roles between the State and society, and the perceived mounting intervention of the palace in daily political management, the palace is likely to face the protests directly, which is likely to jeopardize the country's stability.

⁴ NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE Youth Perceptions in *Youth Perceptions in Morocco: Political Parties in the Wake of Legislative Elections*, National Democratic Institute, 2012.

⁵ "Morocco Five Years after the Arab Uprisings: Findings from the Arab Barometer," Arab Barometer, 8 May, 2017.