

Morocco: A Decade of Popular Struggles and Monarchy Resistance

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade Morocco has been exposed to intermittent mass protests that, although different in their demands, underlined a deep social and economic discontent challenging the Kingdom's supposed "exceptionalism" in term of democratic rights and economic development. However, despite this decade of social turmoil and the limited political opening implemented post-2011, king Mohammed VI skilfully succeeded in holding the reins of power. Cosmetic political reforms, persisting economic hardship and inequalities, the lack of cohesion and capability within the protest movements and the opposition political parties themselves, together with the growing self-confidence of Mohammed VI (also thanks to new external alliances) represent key factors that contributed to the end of the supposed 2011 opening.

Morocco | Domestic policy | Political parties | Political movements | Opposition

keywords

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Introduction

In 2011, popular protests took place in Morocco under the umbrella of the 20 February Movement (20FM) – a popular movement with different souls demanding more justice, dignity and democracy. Yet, despite the 20FM succeeded in pushing the monarchy to adopt a new constitution and open up the political space it broke up quickly because of the internal dynamics of the movement as well as the king's ability to neutralise it gradually.

However, despite the fact that the 20FM did not lead to radical economic and political changes, the movement brought about societal changes that have allowed Moroccans to overcome their fear of speaking up about their deep frustration. Indeed, in the last decade the Kingdom has been exposed to intermittent mass protests that have challenged Morocco's supposed "exceptionalism" as a country where reform was gradually being pursued from the top – a myth originating in the fact that long before the Arab Spring the monarchy had adopted a series of reforms ostensibly moving the country towards democracy.

The reality, however, is that King Mohammed VI has succeeded in retaining power both with its citizens and political parties, including the Islamic Justice and Development Party (PJD) which, while heading the government from 2011 to 2021, failed (and in some respects did not even want) to extract itself from the king's sway. Indeed, the September 2021 elections, in which the PJD suffered a crushing

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defeat, demonstrate that the historic phase inaugurated by the 20FM and of which the Islamist moderate party was the first beneficiary, is over.

Today, a new era (or a step back to the past) is beginning, in which the protagonists of the political scene are *again* political parties very close to the king. Mohammed VI, for his part, is increasingly self-confident, not least thanks to his successful alignment with the axis of Sunni Arab Gulf states, which has been moving against pro-democracy and social protests all over the region.

1. The first wave of protests: The 20 February Movement

In the last decade, the first wave of popular protests took place on 20 February 2011, when thousands of demonstrators gathered in the streets of the country, with crowds especially large in Casablanca, Tangier, Al Hoceima and Rabat. According to 20FM leaders, the protests attracted 350,000 people on the first day, although the Official Agency spoke of 30,000. From then on, and throughout the whole of 2011, protest actions by the 20FM recurred periodically, usually on Sundays, with greater popular mobilisation as the day approached the 20th of each month.

The context in which the 20FM erupted was characterised by deep political and socio-economic discontent. In 2011 a growing disillusionment with political institutions persisted and corruption rate was very high. The legislative, judiciary and executive powers were concentrated in the hands of the king, in power since 1999, and political activists could not publicly raise issues over the monarchy, Islam and Western Sahara (the three red lines of public discourse in Morocco) without incurring the wrath of the State. In addition, the economic and infrastructural investments implemented in the previous decade had had only little effects on the poverty rate and social inequalities as well as imbalances between regions and urban and rural areas.¹ Poverty was mainly driven by a high rate of unemployment (according to the World Bank, youth unemployment reached 19 per cent²), an unaffordable real-estate market and soaring electricity, water and food prices (after the global food security crisis of 2007-2008, price of basic staples such as cooking oil prices increased by 65 per cent).³ The international financial crisis of 2008 dealt a severe blow to Morocco's economy, in particular to key sectors such as tourism, remittances coming from Europe and exports.⁴

¹ Anouar Boukhars, *Politics in Morocco. Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism*, London/New York, Routledge, 2011.

² World Bank Data: *Unemployment, Youth Total (% of Total Labor Force Ages 15-24) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Morocco*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=MA>.

³ Climate Diplomacy website: *Food Price Shocks in Morocco*, <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/food-price-shocks-morocco>. The suffering and frustration of Moroccans, especially in the rural areas, became visible between 2006 and 2008 with the eruption of the "*Coordinations contre la vie chère et la détérioration des services publics*" (Coordination against high cost of living and deterioration of public services).

⁴ Florence Beaugé, "L'économie marocaine commence à pâtir de la récession internationale", in

Despite the difficult socio-economic situation, support for King Mohammed VI was widespread. According to a poll in 2009, one out of two respondents thought that the monarchy was ruling “democratically”.⁵ Most surprisingly, most respondents who were economically unsatisfied attributed their troubles to the government and the political parties – considered by many as “corrupted”. The disdain towards the political parties (around 33 per cent at the time) was quite evident during the 2007 legislative elections, when the rate of participation shrunk to 43 per cent (it had been 67 per cent in 2002). Sixty-three per cent of those who abstained from voting (63 per cent) were young people,⁶ who were considered by many studies as totally depoliticised and inactive.⁷ Underlying this assessment was the assumption that the youth was disaffected because of the ruthless repression of opposition forces during the long reign of Hassan II, Muhammad VI’s father. The experience of political exclusion and marginalisation had created obstacles to participation and brought the youth to be dispersed and atomised.⁸

However, the large participation of young people within the 20FM demonstrated that the narrative of a depoliticised youth was a myth that had generated a collective myopia. Indeed, by hitting the streets of fifty cities across the country for more than six months, the youth demonstrated both its courage and organisational skills. The 20FM was gradually built up on Facebook, when in 2009 a group page named Alternative Movement for Individual Freedoms (MALI) was created. The movement, made up of young secularists who demanded greater individual and collective freedoms, organised a daylight picnic during Ramadan in Rabat, which was then harshly repressed by the authorities⁹ and condemned by most of the local newspapers and clerics. Although the event had minimal participation, it is considered by many leaders of the 20FM as “a catalyst event” which drove hundreds of young Moroccans to engage in political activism.¹⁰ Subsequently to the MALI’s picnic, other small events contributed to strengthening the virtual community, which gradually became more and more tangible. In January 2011, a Facebook group called “Moroccans converse with the king” – which later changed its name in “Freedom and democracy now” – directly addressed Mohammed VI to express a

Le Monde, 3 December 2008, https://www.lemonde.fr/la-crise-financiere/article/2008/12/03/l-economie-marocaine-commence-a-patir-de-la-recession-internationale_1126328_1101386.html.

⁵ Florence Beaugé, “Maroc : le sondage interdit”, in *Le Monde*, 3 August 2009, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/08/03/maroc-le-sondage-interdit_1225217_3212.html.

⁶ Saloua Zerhouni, “Le marketing politique. Faible impact électoral”, in *Economia*, 22 July 2015, <http://economia.ma/fr/content/le-marketing-politique-faible-impact-eleitoral>.

⁷ Saloua Zerhouni, “Jeunes et participation politique au Maroc”, in *Rapports thématiques IRES*, June 2009, https://www.ires.ma/images/PDFs_publications/jeunes_et_participation_politique_au_maroc.pdf.

⁸ Saloua Zerhouni and Azeddine Akasbi, “Youth Activism in Morocco: Exclusion, Agency and the Search for Inclusion”, in *Power2Youth Papers*, No. 15 (September 2016), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/6815>.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Morocco: End Police Actions against Persons Accused of Breaking Ramadan Fast*, 19 September 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/node/237795>.

¹⁰ Ahmed Benchemsi, “Feb20’s Rise and Fall: a Moroccan Story”, in *Le blog de Ahmed Benchemsi*, 17 July 2012, <http://ahmedbenchemsi.com/?p=556>.

demand for change.¹¹

Not by accident, the Facebook group was created in conjunction with the fall of Tunisia's long-standing autocratic ruler, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. Indeed, the revolts that were taking place in the region were critical in bringing together, for the first time in the history of Morocco, all members of the opposition movements, associations, individuals and parties under the umbrella of a single movement. Issues that until recently had only concerned certain social groups – such as the recognition of the Amazigh language as a national language – became priorities also for others, whereby the 20FM gained a new sense of cohesion and common purpose.¹²

While historical associations such as the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) lent movement members their premises in Rabat, left-wing extra-parliamentary forces, Amazigh and Islamist organisation such as *Al-adl wa'l-ihsane* (AWI), joined the movement from the very beginning. AWI, a semi-clandestine organisation that considers the monarchy a "compulsory authority" and questions the fact that the king bears the title of "Commander of the Faithful", was accepted within the ranks of the 20FM on the basis of their demands for a more legally, economically and socially egalitarian state.¹³

As the movement gained more and more support, political parties also came in – albeit discontinuously and sometimes ambiguously, as in the case of the historical Socialist Union of Popular Forces (SUPF) and the PJD. In fact, the PJD, which shares some affinities with the Muslim Brotherhood, opted for staying out of the movement. This decision, taken unilaterally by former secretary general Abdelilah Benkirane pushed a group of young members (called Baraka) to participate in the demonstrations on an individual basis. Contrary to AWI, the PJD had stood for a strategic alliance with the monarchy ostensibly for the sake of peaceful change for decades. Adhering to the 20FM, which was against the *Makhzen* (i.e., the deep State) would have meant admitting to having pursued the wrong strategy for years.¹⁴ However, Benkirane's gamble payed off in November 2011, when the PJD won the legislative elections, taking 107 seats out of 395 and thus the right to lead the government.

As the 20FM eventually gained momentum, its initially generic calls in support of freedom, dignity and social justice became more political, challenging monarchical absolutism (as opposed to the monarchy as such). In 2011 all the mechanisms of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Silvia Colombo et al., "New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle-East and North Africa and their Impact on State-society Relations", in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 14 (October 2018), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9573>.

¹³ Thierry Desrues, "Le Mouvement du 20 février et le régime marocain : contestation, révision constitutionnelle et élections", in *L'Année du Maghreb*, Vol. VIII (2012), p. 359-389, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.1537>.

¹⁴ Interview with Moroccan intellectual, 26 January and 29 July 2021.

authoritarianism were still in place.¹⁵ Art. 19 of the constitution affirmed that the king was the “Commander of the Faithful”: a sacred and inviolable figure who had powers transcending the constitution itself. The king could declare the state of emergency, would preside over the Supreme Council of the Judiciary and appoint the prime minister and cabinet members at will. He also had the power to bypass the executive, legislative and judiciary powers by taking personal executive steps and issuing laws. The parliament could be dissolved by the king: more than being an institution legislating independently, it was a sort of *shura* council, a forum for consultation providing advice to the ruler. The political parties were a tool in the hands of the monarchy under the tutelage of the Ministry of Interior, and the cabinet mainly comprised members of wealthy families well-connected to the monarchy.¹⁶

Although the 20FM never called for the elimination of the monarchy, the movement knew that without a division of powers real change would not come. For this reason, the movement called for the drafting of a new constitution that would place sovereignty in the people, the abolition of art. 19 and a parliamentary monarchy based on the separation of powers. The movement targeted in particular the judiciary, where corruption was widespread,¹⁷ as one of the causes of a faltering economy that suffered from the lack of the rule of law and impunity of wrongdoers. The 20FM, or at least elements of it, also called for the nationalisation of royal holding companies (at the time accounting for almost 8 per cent of national GDP¹⁸), access to health, education and employment, recognition of Amazigh culture and language, freedom of conscience, equality between men and women, as well as abolition of government control of the audio-visual media.¹⁹

2. Mohammed VI and the neutralisation of the 20FM

The constitutional reforms of July 2011 pushed by the king and the legislative elections of November 2011 won by the PJD dealt a fatal blow to the movement. But the fragmentation of the 20FM had begun earlier, in March 2011, when frictions between the various components of the movement started to emerge.

The king proceeded to capitalise on that. Addressing the nation on 9 March, Mohammed VI refrained from criticising the demonstrations and expressed his willingness to adopt constitutional reforms (i.e. recognition of Morocco’s plurality,

¹⁵ Anouar Boukhars, *Politics in Morocco*, cit., p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49-52.

¹⁷ According to Transparency International, in 2011 Morocco ranked 80th out of 180 countries in terms of perceived corruption. See Transparency International website: *2011 Corruption Perceptions Index*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2011>.

¹⁸ Project on Middle East Democracy, *The “February 20” Movement*, June 2011, https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Press_Kit_June2011.pdf.

¹⁹ Thierry Desrues, “Le Mouvement du 20 février et le régime marocain...”, cit.

the consolidation of the rule of law, allow the Parliament to pass laws on most issues, and a prime minister chosen from the electorate) to consolidate Morocco's democracy and development.²⁰ However, the king never mentioned the 20FM, did not question the monarchy and did not address corruption, bribery and inequality.

Immediately after the speech, Mohammed VI moved forward with the constitutional reform process, pardoned political prisoners and increased the minimum wage. As a consequence, the 20FM's appeal ebbed. In the eyes of Moroccans, even though the movement had been able to obtain the constitutional reform, the king remained the ultimate guarantee that reforms could be adopted: Mohammed VI thus became both the spokesman and the driver of change.²¹ This strategy to neutralise the 20FM was accompanied by the repression of protests – during the Casablanca 20FM protests on 13 March, for instance, dozens of protesters were injured and around 100 arrested²² – and of single activists.

While Mohammed VI was pursuing its strategy, fractures within the movement widened. Members of traditional parties favoured a more hierarchical structure within the movement, while young activists preferred a decentralised system. The 20FM's coordination techniques (weekly and local general assemblies, and decisions taken according to consensus rather than majority voting) became a major weakness, as decisions would never go beyond the "let's demonstrate".²³

It was ideological differences, however, that gave the *coup de grace* to the cohesion of the movement. The constitutional reform process during which the king consulted political parties, trade unions and civil society groups, created fractures between those who supported the monarchy as the ultimate driver of constitutional changes and those who wanted a constituent assembly elected by the people. Also, some associations, such as the *Association nationale des diplômés chômeurs du Maroc* (National Association of Unemployed Graduates of Morocco), representing an important part of the Moroccan unemployed,²⁴ soon fell out of love with the movement because of its failure to combine political with economic demands,²⁵ although in some places demonstrations also targeted the monopoly of natural resources and an equal distribution of job and rents.

²⁰ Kingdom of Morocco, *Texte intégral du discours adressé par SM le Roi à la Nation*, 9 March 2011, <https://www.maroc.ma/fr/node/62>.

²¹ Thierry Desrues, "Le Mouvement du 20 février et le régime marocain...", cit.

²² AFP, "Maroc: la police disperse violemment une manifestation à Casablanca", in *Jeune Afrique*, 13 March 2011, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/?p=154312>.

²³ Ahmed Benchemsi, "Feb20's Rise and Fall: a Moroccan Story", cit.

²⁴ According to the Haut-Commissariat au Plan, the Moroccan institution in charge of data production, in 2011, 20 per cent of unemployed were graduates. Today the rate is 25 per cent. For more details see: the website of the Haut-Commissariat au Plan, *Taux de chômage national selon le diplôme*, https://www.hcp.ma/Taux-de-chomage-national-selon-le-diplome_a267.html.

²⁵ Cédric Bayloq and Jacopo Granci, "'20 février'. Discours et portraits d'un mouvement de révolte au Maroc", in *L'Année du Maghreb*, Vol. VIII (2012), p. 239-258, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.1483>.

Islamists and secularists within the movement started to clash over gender issues. While the secular forces of the movement chanted “women and men have the same rights” walking together during the demonstrations, the Islamists chanted “women and men are the same towards militancy” and walked separately.²⁶ According to AWI, in March 2011 leftists within the movement contended that AWI had no place in the 20FM because its progressive and democratic demands collided with the principles of the Islamist organisation.²⁷ While it is likely that this antagonism drove AWI out of the movement – of which they claim to be among the creators – there are other reasons behind AWI’s decision to step out of 20FM. According to AWI, an alternative to a monarchical system can be achieved peacefully and in the long term by igniting a pious revolution against the corrupted and misguided secular state and realise a sort of Islamist revolution in Morocco.²⁸ In this perspective, siding with 20FM was for AWI instrumental to its fight against corruption and despotism. After the adoption of the new constitution and the legislative elections, AWI’s motives for staying in the movement faded because 20FM lost its revolutionary potential.²⁹

The dynamic between the Islamists – in this case AWI – and the secular forces of 20FM must also be analysed from the perspective of a rivalry between the Islamists themselves, that is, between AWI and the PJD.³⁰ After the elections and the PJD joining the government, AWI might have been afraid that by continuing to support and participate in the protests it could have given excuses to the PJD to marginalise and repress it.

3. The second and third waves of protests

While the 20FM broke up quickly in 2011, it brought some societal changes: for the first time Moroccans had addressed directly the regime thus overcoming their fear of speaking up and highlighting the symptoms of a deep frustration.³¹

A second wave of protests, called “the Rif protests”, broke out in 2016. Contrary to the 20FM, the Rif protests did not start on social media nor did they bring together different associations and political parties. The mobilisations were embedded in the local dynamics of the Rif – a region located in the North of the country – but

²⁶ Sara Borrillo, *Femminismi e Islam in Marocco. Attiviste laiche, teologhe, predicatrici*, Naples, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2017, p. 115.

²⁷ Phone interview with AWI member, 26 January 2021.

²⁸ Anouar Boukhars, *Politics in Morocco*, cit., p. 149-150.

²⁹ Phone interview with AWI member, 26 January 2021.

³⁰ Phone interview with Moroccan intellectual, January and July 2021.

³¹ Aude Mazoue, “Maroc : le Mouvement du 20-février ‘n’a pas été massif mais a entraîné des changements de société”, in *France 24*, 20 February 2021, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210220-maroc-le-mouvement-du-20-février-n-a-pas-été-massif-mais-a-entraîné-des-changements-de-société>.

were then supported at the national level as they focused on challenges facing Moroccan citizens who did not belong to the elites and lived in under-developed regions.

The demonstrations started in Al Hoceima in 2016, when a fishmonger, Mouhcine Fikri, was crushed in a garbage compactor as he tried to retrieve his swordfish catch from the authorities, which had seized it as the fishing season was over. However, Fikri's death ignited public resentment, which resulted in spontaneous demonstrations. What began as a spontaneous movement calling for an inquiry into this death turned into one of the longest protest actions in the region since 2011.³² Composed mainly by young people, supported by their families and a large part of the Al Hoceima's population, the *hirak* turned quickly into a protest movement claiming better economic and social conditions.

The town of Al Hoceima has had tense relations with the monarchy since the 1920s, when the Berber population of the region defeated the Spanish army and declared a short-lived Rif Republic (1923–1926). As well as having serious problems of reconciliation with the state,³³ the region had been ignored for decades by the regime, thus being economically marginalised. In 2015, Mohammed VI launched an important development programme called *Al Hoceima Manarat al Mutawassit* (Al Hoceima Mediterranean Lighthouse). But the Rif protests denounced the several shortcomings of this programme in terms of infrastructure projects, malfunctioning of the hospitals, the absence of universities and, more fundamentally, the lack of real opportunities for young people³⁴ – in 2014, the unemployment rate in Al Hoceima was 21 per cent, well above the average of the other regional municipalities (12 per cent).³⁵ This compelled Al Hoceima youth to emigrate to Europe or to opt for informal and illegal activities.

During the protests, demands ranged from public investment and infrastructures (roads and highways to better connect the region to the rest of the country), to the establishment of a cancer treatment centre (cancer rates in the town are high, which is often attributed to Spain's use of mustard gas in 1926 or the Moroccan army's bombing in 1958). The most radical protesters also demanded the return of Abdelkrim's remains, the first president of the Rif Republic, from Cairo and his commemoration as an Amazigh-democratic figure, and not just as an anti-colonial symbol.³⁶

³² Aida Alami, "Morocco's Stability is Roiled by Monthslong Protests over Fishmonger's Death", in *The New York Times*, 26 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/26/world/africa/morocco-berber-rif-nasser-zefzafi.html>.

³³ In 1956, Hassan II violently crushed a rebellion in the Rif.

³⁴ Aida Alami, "Morocco's Stability is Roiled by Monthslong Protests over Fishmonger's Death", cit.

³⁵ David Gouery, "La pauvreté, à l'origine du Hirak?", in *TAFRA Blog*, 5 February 2019, <https://tafra.ma/?p=2776>.

³⁶ Hisham Aidi, "Is Morocco Heading Toward Insurrection?", in *The Nation*, 13 July 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/?p=253592>.

As the Riffian revolution became a cultural icon and an emblem of an alternative Morocco also outside this region, with implications for the country's stability,³⁷ the regime started to repress the movement. For months, police blockades surrounded the city, demonstrations were banned and *hirak* leaders and members jailed. In 2018, 53 people were handed sentences from two to twenty years in prison. This wave of repression has turned the movement claims from having a socio-economic dimension to a human-rights one. But, as a prominent Moroccan intellectual says, "the regime is comfortable with this: the activists focus on the release of the prisoners, and not anymore on social and economic changes, and when the king pardons the prisoners they all say how good the regime is".³⁸ As the Al Hoceima protests were repressed, the regime achieved its main goal. In 2018, the demonstrations ended and local youth started to emigrate again. This regional trend mirrored a national one. According to the Arab Barometer, in 2019 lack of economic opportunities and public services, corruption and an increasing repression of human rights were driving nearly half of Moroccans into considering emigrating.³⁹

From the experience of the 20FM and the Rif protests, new forms of mass mobilisations, which can be called a third wave of protests, took place through innovative methods that gave protesters some leeway. In April 2018, a country-wide boycott against three companies, Sidi Ali bottled water, Centrale Danone and Afriquia gas stations, took place. Organised on social media by activists, the boycotts targeted these companies because they all represented the economic *Makhzen*, or the monopoly of the economy in the hands of few. According to a study conducted by *L'Economiste*, within two weeks 90 per cent of Moroccans were aware of the campaign and three quarters of citizens – in particular the youth – participated in the boycott in some way.⁴⁰ However, despite the fact that the boycott persisted for several months and Centrale Danone reduced prices, it failed to impact decisions of the other two companies (which did not lower prices of their products) and to launch a social movement, mainly because of a lack of an identifiable leadership.⁴¹

Despite being very different in their strategies, the 20FM demonstrations, the Rif protests and the mass-boycotts all pointed out the deep governance failures often linked to corruption, inefficiency and patronage networks.⁴² As a matter of fact,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Phone interview with prominent Moroccan intellectual, December 2020.

³⁹ Daniella Raz, *Youth in the Middle East and North Africa*, Arab Barometer, August 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Youth_Report_Public-Opinion_Middle-East-North-Africa_2019-1.pdf.

⁴⁰ Nadia Salah, "Enquête l'Economiste-Sunergia/Boycott: Danone, un cas très special", in *L'Economiste*, No. 5279 (24 May 2018), <https://www.leconomiste.com/node/1028758>.

⁴¹ Mohammed Masbah, "'Let it Spoil!': Morocco's Boycott and the Empowerment of 'Regular' Citizen", in *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Reports*, 14 November 2018, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/11/181114115931285.html>.

⁴² Chloe Teevan, "The EU, Morocco, and the Stability Myth", in *Sada*, 16 June 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79514>.

all the ingredients – such as the economic crisis, the unsatisfied demands – for a future revolt are currently still there.

4. Internal dynamics and external powers: The ability of Mohammed VI to hold the reins of the Kingdom

Albeit the 20FM inaugurated, in a spectacular way, a period of long-lasting mobilisation, exposing the Kingdom to intermittent mass protests, it did not lead to radical changes. Moreover, the adoption of the new constitution did not represent any meaningful and deep change in the institutional architecture of the state. The adoption of the organic laws as required to implement the constitutional provisions was delayed for years, and for the most part the implementation of the organic laws has happened without the participation of civil society.⁴³

Regional dynamics such as the civil wars in Libya and Syria and the rise of the jihadist threat in North Africa were exploited by the monarchy as an excuse to end the political opening shortly thereafter. Indeed, since 2011 Morocco has been witnessing a hardening repression. According to Freedom House, today authorities use a number of financial, legal and harassment mechanisms to punish journalists – especially those who focus on the king, Western Sahara and Islam, the three red lines that citizens must not cross. In 2020, several journalists and intellectuals, such as the historian Maâti Monjib, were detained.⁴⁴

It is likewise important to take into account that retrenchment of civic space in Morocco occurred in a decade in which the PJD penetrated the political system significantly. Indeed, the constitutional reforms of July 2011 opened up the political space and provided political parties with new avenues. As had happened in other Arab countries, the Islamist party was better positioned than the others to garner popular consent. The historian Maâti Monjib had warned against this prospect:

The worst case scenario [for the protest movement in Morocco] would be for the PJD to come out as victorious, with one of its leaders named head of the government, as such an outcome would restore credibility to the king's reforms and the PJD would be unable to push for any core reforms once within the system.⁴⁵

Indeed, after coming out on top at the December 2011 elections, the Islamist party became the monarchy's best ally through a sort of normalisation process, which

⁴³ Silvia Colombo et al., "New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle-East and North Africa...", cit.

⁴⁴ Freedom House, "Morocco", in *Freedom in the World 2021*, <https://freedomhouse.org/node/4135>. See also Human Rights Watch, "Morocco/Western Sahara", in *World Report 2021. Events of 2020*, 2021, p. 463-469, <https://www.hrw.org/node/377405>.

⁴⁵ Maâti Monjib, "Will Morocco's Elections Subdue Popular Protests?", in *Sada*, 22 November 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/46041>.

had actually started already in the 1990s under the leadership of Benkirane. As the PJD became the titular head of the government, it started to enjoy resources and avoid harsh repression like the one faced by the opposition parties.⁴⁶ But the king's blessing of the Islamist party was part of a wider monarchy strategy: the PJD was the best ally for stabilising the country thanks to its grassroots and to its strong organisation.⁴⁷

During the 2011 electoral campaign, the PJD presented its programme for a "new Morocco", echoing the 20FM grievances. The programme was based on five pillars, among which a democratic state without corruption, a dynamic economy protecting social justice and a country without foreign interferences.⁴⁸ But once in government, the PJD failed to deliver: from the fight against corruption and the implementation of a judicial reform, the party essentially gave up, whether because of a lack of political will or due to the strength of the vested interests of its leadership.⁴⁹ Its ambiguity was clear during the Rif protests, when the PJD turned its back to the *hirak*. In 2017, after almost one year of demonstrations, the PJD – together with five other ruling political parties – criticised the *hirak* as "secessionist", thus endorsing the securitisation discourse adopted by the regime, which subsequently led to the repression of the movement.⁵⁰

Two factors explain the attitude of the PJD towards the Rif protests. First, the PJD's electorate is mainly constituted by the urban middle class, which has no radical claims but rather pays taxes and hopes to secure a future for its children. Second, the PJD is extremely concerned about the regime's reaction against itself.⁵¹ Thus, whereas the PJD has always said that change should occur from the inside, it is the system that has eventually changed the party.⁵²

While PJD may be reasonably accused of opportunism, it should be noted that any party or political force would have difficulties to break away from Mohammed VI, as after all Morocco's institutional structure and political system do not allow the ruling party to be independent from the king and set its own policies. Moroccans showed no understanding though. The result of the legislative elections of September 2021, in which the PJD won only 12 seats compared to the 102 gained

⁴⁶ Mohammed Masbah, "Morocco: Can the PJD Still Absorb Popular Anger?", in *Bawader*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=9509>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ PJD, *Pour un Maroc nouveau. Programme électoral du Parti de la Justice et du Développement. Elections législatives du 25 novembre 2011*, <https://jalileoutmani.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/lc3a9gislatives-2011-programme-pjd-fr.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Intissar Fakir, "Morocco's Islamist Party. Redefining Politics Under Pressure", in *Carnegie Papers*, December 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/75121>.

⁵⁰ Smail Hamoudi, "Securitization" of the Rif Protests and Its Political Ramifications, Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA), September 2019, <https://mipa.institute/7003>.

⁵¹ Nina Kozłowski, "Maroc: les islamistes du PJD face à l'usure du pouvoir", in *Jeune Afrique*, 22 January 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1108508/politique/maroc-le-pjd-face-a-lusure-du-pouvoir>.

⁵² Ibid.

by the *Rassemblement National des Indépendants* (RNI), a party very close to the monarchy, was a massive defeat. Still in 2016 the Islamist party had won 125 seats, 18 per cent more than in 2011.

The September 2021 elections have demonstrated that the historical phase triggered by the 20FM in 2011, of which the PJD was the first beneficiary, is over. Today the protagonists of the political scene are political parties very close to the king and against which the 20FM and the boycott movement fought. Indeed, Morocco's new prime minister is RNI's secretary, Aziz Akhannouch, a businessman close to Mohammed VI with the largest private wealth in the country and the owner of Afriquia, one of the three private companies targeted by the boycott movement.

The growing self-confidence of Mohammed VI at the national level has also to do with the success of his foreign policy. Indeed, in the last decade the king has managed to consolidate an alliance with the EU and the United States and strengthen relations with Gulf and African countries,⁵³ while also deepening ties with China and Russia.

Right after Mohammed VI's public speech of 9 March 2011, for instance, the EU expressed its satisfaction towards Morocco with a tangible increase in annual aid and in the number of bilateral agreements. These actions were in contrast with the decision that the EU had just taken to review its policies towards North African countries in light of the Arab uprisings and apply a "more for more" approach by which the Southern Mediterranean countries would be rewarded only if they progressed along the democratic path. The fact that the EU exempted Morocco from its "more for more" approach might be explained as follows. First, with insecurity on the rise across the MENA region, the EU decided to be content with Morocco's limited democratic reforms so as to secure a cooperative government in Rabat and avoid creating further instability. Second, such EU member states as France and Spain, Morocco's largest trading partners, were keen to de-emphasise democracy promotion in order to protect their established ties with the monarchy and the political-economic system reliant on it.⁵⁴ Even though a large majority of the Moroccan population continues to favour rapid political change and rejects the status-quo,⁵⁵ the EU has refrained from linking its ambition to forge its "strategic, multidimensional and privileged relationship" with Morocco⁵⁶ to progress on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.⁵⁷ The EU's reluctance to do so may have even become a moot point, however. The Moroccan regime today is less

⁵³ Nizar Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI: Balancing Diversity and Respect", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|78 (October 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12287>.

⁵⁴ Silvia Colombo and Benedetta Voltolini, "'Business as Usual' in EU Democracy Promotion Towards Morocco? Assessing the Limits of the EU's Approach towards the Mediterranean after the Arab Uprisings", in *L'Europe en Formation*, No. 371 (2014), p. 41-57, <https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.371.0041>.

⁵⁵ Daniella Raz, *Youth in the Middle East and North Africa*, cit.

⁵⁶ European Union and Morocco, *Joint Declaration for the Fourteenth Meeting of the Association Council*, 27 June 2019, <https://europa.eu/!vJ99Fh>.

⁵⁷ Chloe Teevan, "The EU, Morocco, and the Stability Myth", cit.

vulnerable to pressure from the EU to improve its human rights record, given the king's success in diversifying Morocco's external relations, including growing ties with China and Russia.

Moreover, the regime has now its own cards to put pressure on the EU by easing migration controls at its borders and let migrants take the road to Europe – especially with member States, such as Spain, who are not aligned with the Moroccan position on the Western Sahara issue. In May 2021, following Spain's decision to host for medical treatment Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario front that fights for the independence of Western Sahara, Rabat relaxed its border controls with the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, letting around 8,000 of people cross into Europe,⁵⁸ before excluding Spain from "Operation Marhaba" (supposed to manage the return of Moroccans living abroad to Morocco) for the summer of 2021. The incident provoked a severe diplomatic crisis between Rabat and Madrid, prompting the Spanish government to send military reinforcement to the territories, while continuing to host Ghali.

What has most helped Rabat to take a harder line with Spain was the December 2020 United States recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, which ended nearly thirty years of US support for UN-led negotiations based on the promotion of a referendum in the territories to determine whether to grant it autonomy, independence or full integration with Morocco.⁵⁹ However, Trump's decision – which came with the US proposal of selling to Rabat 1 billion dollars in weapons – was part of a deal which envisaged a partial diplomatic normalisation between Morocco and Israel, together with the promotion of economic and technological cooperation between the two states. The agreement had far-reaching regional and domestic implications. At the regional level, despite the agreement was harshly criticised by some Arab countries, such as Algeria, it paid off with Morocco's target allies, namely the Gulf States. Indeed, today Rabat is closer to the Arab Gulf allies, especially the United Arab Emirates, which have pursued their own détente policy towards Israel to secure a firmer US commitment to their security and have recognised Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. That said, Morocco's strategic alliance with some Arab Gulf countries had started earlier and paid off also in economic terms. In 2011, for instance, Gulf countries strongly supported Rabat with 5 billion dollars of financial aid, as well as with military, infrastructure and tourism investments. In exchange of financial support, Morocco endorsed – with some exceptions – critical foreign policy choices of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh such as the war in Yemen or pressure on Iran.

⁵⁸ "Morocco Wants Investigation Into Polisario Chief's Spain Arrival", in *Al Jazeera*, 22 May 2021, <https://aje.io/uxlmy>.

⁵⁹ Kristen E. Eichensehr et al., "United States Recognizes Morocco's Sovereignty Over Western Sahara", in *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (April 2021), p. 318-323, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2021.11>.

At the internal level, the partial normalisation with Israel is a double-edged sword for the monarchy.⁶⁰ On the one side, the king's decision (the Parliament was not consulted) provoked popular criticism with protests in support of the Palestinian cause or against the normalisation, especially in May 2021 in solidarity with Palestinians facing Israeli attacks in Gaza. But on the other side, the king was capable to appease domestic criticism by expressing pro-Palestine support and by presenting this deal as a tool for acting as a mediator between Palestinians and Israelis.⁶¹ Also, with the political parties, the king emerged unhurt while the PJD paid the price of the decision during the last legislative elections. Indeed, despite some critical voices within the Islamic party, the king's decision has been supported by the party leadership and this move might be considered as one of the triggering factors that contributed to the PJD defeat. Historically, in the Arab world, people have always considered Islamist parties as a tool to get out of their sense of submission to the West. The fact that the so-called normalisation process happened with the PJD in power has shattered this myth.

However, at the international level, the partial normalisation and the US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara did not bring major changes. After Trump's move, the United Nations declared that its position remained unchanged, underscoring the need to relaunch diplomacy in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions on the conflict,⁶² while the EU remained silent, thus confirming its ambiguous position. Indeed, for many years the EU has been neglecting the Western Sahara issue by focusing, instead, to its bilateral relations with Morocco,⁶³ especially with trade agreements that have been applied also to the disputed territories. Yet, despite the hesitation of Brussels, recent developments may lead the EU to adopt a different approach. In September 2021, the European Court of Justice (CJEU) declared invalid two of the EU-Morocco trade agreements on agriculture and fishery over Western Sahara – as they were not agreed with the consent of the Sahraoui people. Brussels has immediately reacted by publishing a joint statement with Rabat underlying its willingness to ensure bilateral trade cooperation with the Kingdom. That said, the CJEU decision underscores the need for the EU institutions to respect European laws and, therefore, rebalance its ties with Morocco.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Yasmina Abouzzouhour, "Partial Normalization: Morocco's Balancing Act", in *Bawader*, 10 August 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=19484>.

⁶¹ Yasmina Abouzzouhour, "Morocco's Partial Normalization with Israel Comes with Risks and Gains", in *Order from Chaos*, 14 December 2020, <https://brook.gs/34e05YW>.

⁶² Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Security Council to Talk Western Sahara after Trump Policy Switch", in *Reuters*, 17 December 2020, <https://reut.rs/3ajkCPG>.

⁶³ Hugh Lovatt, "Western Sahara, Morocco, and the EU: How Good Law Makes Good Politics", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 30 September 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=78120>. See also: Malcolm Cavanagh, "The EU's Confused Western Sahara Position – A Foreign Policy Failure, Or an Opportunity?", in *LSE Department of International Relations Blog*, 4 May 2021, <https://wp.me/p2Slxn-Qw>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Although the 20FM movement prompted the Moroccan monarchy to enact reforms, such as the adoption of a new constitution, the post-2011 period has not brought about radical changes from an economic, social and political point of view.

The new constitution has not modified the institutional architecture of the state in any appreciable measure. Unsurprisingly the Islamist party that won the first legislative elections after the 2011 protests, the PJD, was eventually unable – and unwilling – to govern independently of the monarch. This behaviour and alignment with the monarchy has led the PJD to lose popular support. The regime, while stalling the reform process, has unleashed its repressive machine against citizens and political activists. Finally, King Mohammed VI has managed to hold the reins of power also thanks to the new external alliances he has built up over the years, especially with the United States and the Arab gulf states.

This notwithstanding, Morocco has kept witnessing sporadic and intermittent protests which, although different in composition and strategies, have highlighted the fact that the 20FM has brought lasting societal changes. Today, all the ingredients of a future revolt are still present: lack of economic opportunity, insufficient provision of public goods by the state and restrictions to individual and collective rights. But no one knows if it will ever take place, neither in which form, nor when. This is even more the case in the current historical juncture that was opened with the defeat of the PJD in the elections and the return of political parties close to the king to the centre of the political scene.

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