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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

MOROCCO/ On the eve of the February 20th protests

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Moroccans were summoned, by youth groups on Facebook, to begin their own private *intifadah* on 20 February 2011. Although the organisers were planning for a massive mobilization, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where the aim was to overthrow the regime, in Morocco a ceiling was set on their demands: a new constitution capable of bringing the country out of its political immobilism and radical solutions to the profound social and economic problems that its population is suffering. The initiative was clearly the result of the *contagion* throughout the entire Arab and Islamic world stemming from the political changes that have come about following Tunisia and Egypt's revolutions. Nevertheless, the arguments in favour of protesting in Morocco, according to the organisers, are just as indigenous as those that led young people in those two countries to rise up, followed subsequently by opposition parties.

In any case, compared with other countries in the region, the response of the Moroccan population and opposition to these revolutionary movements has been gradual and cautious. The decision to protest on February 20th to express these demands was the culmination of an elaborate process to reorient the attention of society and political actors away from regional events towards national problems and issues.

At first, the reaction on the streets of Morocco was limited to number of reduced concentrations convened in Rabat and other cities convoked by the organisations and networks that are habitually involved in this type of protest or solidarity action. But these had an exclusively international focus. Only after these pre-existing structures converged with the Internet-based initiatives led by a group that calls itself the "20th February Youth Movement", which has been much bolder in its objectives, did a process of internalization of the demands for political change take place. The preparations for this major day of mobilization took on an unusual dynamism. For once, many players got over their usual, same old discourse about Morocco's singularity, and the flames of the contagion spread.

The calls for a massive mobilization of the population did not leave anyone indifferent. The frenzy of the countdown forced all the country's politicians to define their positions, causing considerable tension within those political parties that participate in the government.

Moreover, the fact that the initial date set for the protests was 27 February, which coincided with the anniversary of the founding of the Polisario Front, led to a major media battle in both print and digital news media, which tried to associate the organisers of this initiative with the "enemies of national territorial unity" and call into question their intentions. These attacks created a lot of doubts among citizens and among the political parties that had been called on to take part. At the same time, these attacks led the youth organisers to reaffirm their willingness to carry on with their plans assuming the consequences, an attitude which earned them the unconditional support of much of civil society.

Timeline of protests

Initially, the sole objective of mobilizations in Morocco was to express support and solidarity with the people of Tunisia and Egypt. The first concentration convened before the Tunisian Embassy in Rabat, on 10 January was prevented by the authorities, but still led to an ad hoc coordination being set up, in charge of leading future initiatives. This was called 'The Moroccan coordinator in support of Tunisian democrats.' In this structure, some of the

leaders of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) had a leading role¹.

Subsequent acts of solidarity with the people of Tunisia - concentrations in Rabat (13 and 20 January) and a festive day of solidarity in Casablanca (January 22) - were able to take place without undue difficulty and were supported logistically by other critical left-wing actors like the Moroccan Labour Union (UMT) and the Unified Socialist Party (PSU).

Meanwhile, the fall of President Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali gave rise to concentrations in different cities and a barrage of press releases congratulating the Tunisian people. Delegations from Moroccan organisations also flew immediately to Tunisia, including the Coordinator of Moroccan Human Rights Organizations (CMODH), the Moroccan League for the Defence of Human Rights (LMDDH), the Moroccan Forum for Truth and Justice (FMVJ), the Moroccan section of Amnesty International, and the Marxist Annahj Addimocrati party.

These relatively modest acts were reinforced at the end of January by a new series of events, inspired by the *intifadah* in Egypt, which were promoted by the same actors, but able to rally increasingly broad numbers of participants. The first gathering in front of the Egyptian Embassy in Rabat (January 31), for example, saw the participation of all the human rights organisations², other different types of associations³, several trade unions⁴, left-wing non-governmental political parties and their youth divisions⁵, the National Association of Unemployed Graduates (ANDCM) and the National Union of Students (UNEM). This type of event would be repeated on February 4th and 8th on Mohamed V Avenue in downtown Rabat, backed now by the National Action Committee in Support of Iraq and Palestine, a specialist in coordinating protests for Arab causes, which has since 2002 joined in the same umbrella group, militants from a broad spectrum of political parties and associations both from the left (members and non-members of the government coalition) and from among Islamists. During this period, moreover, the 'The Moroccan coordinator in support of Tunisian democrats' was renamed 'Moroccan Democratic Solidarity with the People Network' to "affirm the democratic identity" of its members.

Until then, the slogans used in concentrations related strictly to international events. The protesters enthusiastically proclaimed solidarity with the Tunisian and Egyptian democrats, but without transposing these demands for political change onto internal Moroccan politics, in what seemed to be a measure of restraint. For example, the motto agreed to on January 31 was: "Morocco's democratic forces denounce the repression of the Egyptian people and support our brothers' heroic insurrection against oppression and despotism, for freedom, dignity and democracy." But the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak was a turning point. On the night of February 11, the "day of victory", a slogan copied

¹ The AMDH is the organisation that, over the last decade, has most sustained and stood up for that section of the left-wing opposition which is most reluctant to compromise with the regime. In doing so it has assumed a fully political role. Given the total lack of legitimacy and scarce mobilisation capacity of the political parties, this is now one of the few structured forces that does adopt openly critical stances on issues and has nationwide roots.

² AMDH, Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (OMDH), Moroccan League for the Defence of Human Rights (LMDDH), Moroccan Centre for Human Rights (CMDH) Moroccan Forum for Truth and Justice (FMVJ), etcetera.

³ Adala Association, ATTAC, Transparency International, Azetta (Amazigh Network for Citizenship) etcetera.

⁴ UMT and Democratic Labour Confederation (CDT), among others.

⁵ The PSU, VD, the Democratic Socialist Vanguard Party (PADS), the Ittihadi National Congress (CNI).

from demonstrators in Cairo, "The people want the fall of the regime" was more powerful than ever. And for the first time, protesters displayed messages that could be applied to Morocco itself: "Change is possible", "First, Ben Ali. Second, Mubarak. Who is next?...". The next day a national day of solidarity with the Egyptian people was held and gatherings sprang up in other cities apart from the capital.

Meanwhile, several independent figures from the Moroccan opposition abroad seized the opportunity in the international news media, like Prince Moulay Hicham in an interview with *El País*, to point out that "Morocco will not be the exception" to the wave of protests shaking the authoritarian Arab regimes. The journalist Aboubakr Jamaï, founder of the shut-down *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, published several articles on "the fragile safety valves" of Mohamed VI's regime and declared to *Le Nouvel Observateur* that "if Morocco catches fire, the disparity of wealth is such that the revolution there will be much bloodier than in Tunisia." For his part, the former air force captain, Mustapha Adib, who was prosecuted for reporting the corruption in the Royal Armed Forces, addressed open letters to the king and the military, urging the former to reform the constitution and the latter not to use force against possible demonstrations.

The country's powerful Islamist organisation *Al Adl wal Ihsane*, considered one of the best structured opposition forces, broke its silence to publish on its website a letter entitled "Before it is too late", which also called for a new constitution (a position subsequently confirmed by its leader's daughter, Nadia Yassine, in an interview with *El País*). All of these noisy opponents were, as a result, severely attacked from the pages of newspapers close to the regime such as *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, *An Nahar Al Magribiya* or *Al Masaa*, who accused them of "fabricating the myth of contagion."

The basic ingredients were there: powerful references to Tunisia and Egypt, pre-existing mobilisation structures, and propitious language from several renowned figures. But to launch a protest of a certain size, calling for changes to the Moroccan political system, a new element was needed, as was also the case in Tunisia and Egypt. This turned out to be a variety of initiatives set up on internet by hitherto unknown young Moroccans. Within this amorphous group were the creators of the Facebook groups "Freedom and Democracy Now," "The people want change" or "Intifadah for dignity", which collectively issued on 13 February their first joint statement calling on both the population and the political forces to take part in a massive march on 20 February for political change in Morocco.

According to this movement, which has been re-baptised, "Youths of 20 February" the objectives of this peaceful demonstration are: "profound and radical constitutional and political changes to consolidate a democratic state based on strong institutions with full powers; the establishment of a rule of law based on a free and independent justice system; with the objective of giving the country the political system of a parliamentary monarchy." A video that has spread like wildfire on the Internet shows 15 young Moroccans explaining their reasons for participating, a mix of socioeconomic demands - dignity, equality, jobs, housing, study grants - and political demands - a democratic constitution, an end to corruption and the *hogra* (humiliation and contempt of social inferiors) - without making direct mention nevertheless, of King Mohamed VI.

Participants in the demonstrations on February 20

The initiative appeared to have been successful among civil society. At the time of publication of this article (19 February) besides the "Youths of February

20th" are a large number of organisations had confirmed their participation in the day of protest through press releases, press conferences, interviews or via their respective websites. These include a wide array of associations, NGOs (many of them human rights related), Moroccan branches of international NGOs, left-wing political parties from outside the governing coalition, youth divisions of all the left-wing parties, trade unions, Islamist movements, Amazigh movements, and locally coordinated groups⁶.

As well as these organisations, the initiative also received support from Moroccan personalities and intellectuals such as Prince Moulay Hicham, Mahdi Manyra and Abdullah Hammoudi among others, as well as numerous associations of immigrants in European countries (France, Belgium, Netherlands).

Among the organisations participating in the 20th February demonstrations, the presence of the Amazigh movement stands out. Despite the appeals from the organisers to unify slogans and avoid unnecessary divisions, the Amazigh movement hoped to make the most of this initiative to publicise its political-cultural cause, notably wider constitutional recognition of Amazigh language and culture.

The same observation could be made in the case of the Islamist organisations, of which Al Adl wal Ihsane stands out for its ability to bring out the masses. However, its leaders declared that their participation would be coordinated with the organising committees⁶ and was not going to involve a large turnout.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that no political party, except for the parties on the "critical" left, had announced its participation in the protests. Not even the parties that currently form part of the parliamentary opposition did so. In official statements some parties, such as the PJD, the USFP or even the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) - regarded as the 'king's own party' - recognised the legitimacy of the protests and even claimed that they share the demands of the organisers, but ultimately decided to boycott the protest. This is only a sample of the complete chasm that separates Morocco's political class and Moroccan society, especially its youth. Not surprisingly, turnout rates in the most recent legislative and municipal elections were at a historic low-point.

The most curious fact of all, is that the youth divisions of these same parties, including the USFP socialists, the PPS communists or the PJD Islamists, openly dissociated themselves from the positions of their party leaders and decided to participate in the demonstrations on their own. It is not the first time that the youth divisions have shown such independence, since differences of this kind were apparent in the 2009 municipal elections in many constituencies. It appears that the behaviour of these young Moroccans is a form of expressing their rejection of the absence of internal democracy in the parties when it comes to decision-making processes, as well as rejection of the party leaders' resistance to natural processes, such as the rejuvenation of the party structures⁷.

⁶ A complete and detailed list of all the organisations that were due to take part in the protests can be found in [the original version of this article \(in Spanish\)](#),

⁷ In this vein, at a meeting held on Thursday, February 3rd to study the events that are taking place in the Arab world and their impact on the reality of Moroccan youth, 14 youth organisations, including the youth divisions of several political parties (such as the PJD, the Istiqlal, the USFP and PPS) as well as civil society associations, issued a brief statement in which they announced they were setting up a national youth coordination group named "Youths for the Fatherland" aimed at "coordinating their efforts to consolidate democracy and continue with political and institutional reforms."