

# كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking\_The\_Mold

## Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: **Morocco**

Keywords: **Boycotting, Social and Economic rights, Coalitions, Civil Society activism in a monarchy**

### The Moroccan Boycott Movement of 2018 | Rachid Touhtou |

#### BACKGROUND

The 2018 Moroccan Boycott Movement (Moukatiouan) started through Facebook and WhatsApp, calling for Moroccans to boycott the products of three big companies, mainly 'Centrale Danone', 'Sidi Ali' and 'Afriquia Gas Station'. The boycott was a success through its use of social media, triggering debates and reactions from the government and the three concerned companies. The online/virtual boycott movement imposed its collective will on the political and government actors. The online movement, without any known leadership, started in 2018 through social media platforms, and was triggered by online activism after the heavy repression by the Moroccan police against the Rif Hirak and other social movements between 20016 and 2018. There was a sense of disillusionment among the middle class after the 2011 constitutional reforms and the failures of the 2011 government policies to impact the wellbeing of the middle class in Morocco. In addition to boycotting the major international corporation Centrale Danone, Moroccans also boycotted two big national companies, namely Sidi Ali and Afriquia Gas Station. It was a boycott against the monopoly of economy and politics by an elite which benefited from its close connections to the palace.

#### TIMELINE

The Moukatiouan campaign started in the spring and summer of 2018, calling for the boycott of three major products manufactured by three companies in Morocco, namely Sidi Ali, Centrale-Danone and Afriquia Gas Station. The campaign started on April 20, 2018, with the Arabic hashtag 'Khelih Irib', which can be translated into 'Let It Spoil', was shared and re-shared by users on social media networks. This hashtag was used not only to express the users' resentment towards the exorbitant prices of products sold by three leading companies, mineral water (Sidi Ali), milk (Centrale Danone), and gasoline (Afriquia), but also to express their rejection of the market monopolization and price manipulation in Morocco. This was also one of the slogans of the 20 February movement in

2011, which is the rejection of the unhealthy relationship between politics and business, or otherwise known as crony capitalism<sup>1</sup>. The owner of Sidi Ali was the president of the Confederation General des Enterprises du Maroc (CGEM), and the owner of Afriquia Gas Station is the minister of agriculture and the president of the RNI, a political party that has connections with the palace. The party was founded by the brother-in-law of the late King Hassan II, Ahmed Osman; he studied with the late king in the royal school.

The Let It Spoil campaign used Facebook and Twitter to post pictures and videos comparing the high prices of mineral water, milk and gasoline in Morocco with the cost of the same products in other parts of the world to show that even in countries where the minimum wage is six times more than Morocco, the prices of the same products are three times or four times cheaper. There were striking WhatsApp videos by Moroccans living in Western Europe showing the prices in big supermarkets of the same products but cheaper in price compared to Morocco. The boycott went beyond the national frontiers and attracted Moroccans abroad expressing solidarity against the high prices of these products compared to the low wages in Morocco.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY ACTOR'S ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT

Since the boycott started online, it created a new form of social activism in Morocco. For the first time in the history of social movements in Morocco, we are witnessing an online form of (non-)social movements using social media to escape repression and imprisonment. In this sense, I think there is a need to talk about an online civil society/public sphere activism born out of this movement. This virtual civil society was open to every citizen joining the movement by boycotting these products and then participating actively or passively in the online discussions on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. The political context prior to 2018 is very indicative of this campaign.

<sup>1</sup> An economic system in which family members and friends of government officials and business leaders are given unfair advantages in the form of jobs, loans, access to land, etc.

Right after the 2016 legislative elections that handed the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) an election victory, there was a political deadlock when the regime, through a billionaire and a politician and his wife; a billionaire family owning the biggest retail company in Morocco and owning a Mall, called Morocco Mall, one of the biggest Malls in North Africa; he was also on FORBES and ranked 13 in Africa). The Aziz Akhannouch-led National Rally of Independents (RNI) party, thwarted former Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane from building a new government, after his second electoral victory. This showdown of political force led to a political vacuum and distrust in the political process and the intensification of the palace's domination over the political system.

The death of the fish vendor Mohcine Fikri, on October 28, 2016 inside a garbage compactor, after the local authorities confiscated his fish load of the day, triggered robust protests in the Rif region and elsewhere. Moroccan protesters took advantage of the political vacuum left by Benkirane's political blockade by the Makhzen, by escalating the tone of protests that has led to massive arrests among protesters in the Rif, including its leader Nasser Zefzafi and 22 others in May 2017. A chain of protests were sparked in other regions, such as in Jerada in January 2018. Still, the mass arrest of activists since May 2017 has, in fact, deterred many from taking to the streets, as protesting was clearly costly.

Civil society as a component of the public sphere were behind the boycott. Many politicians and civil society activists expressed their solidarity with the boycott movement. There were also others who were anti-boycott, calling the boycotters "Dummies." Two political parties, mainly the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) and Independence party called for the government to listen to the boycotters and control the prices. Imams were also used in the campaign, and came out either for or against the boycott. The minister of Islamic affairs fired an imam after giving a Friday speech expressing solidarity with the boycotters. There were also videos and pictures of famous personalities and ministers consuming the products.

## STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Social media outlets under the hashtags of "Let It Spoil" mobilized boycotters online. They expressed anger and refusal against high prices and against the high cost of living in Morocco. By late May 2018, the scope of the boycott extended to fish markets due to high prices, and hashtags of "Let It Rot" and "Let It Swim" went viral. The strategic use of social media was an effective tool in the boycott campaign as it makes it easier to diffuse the message and almost impossible to crack down on, as those behind the campaign have remained anonymous, staying off the streets and being selective in their targets. When the campaign was launched in April, the hashtag "Let It Spoil" went viral on social media, especially on Facebook. Several pages on Facebook were created and sometimes duplicated the same content. Social media was used for mobilization as an effective strategy to make the boycott a success.

The boycott campaign has been more popular than any previous calls for protest. Within two weeks of its launch on April 20, 2018, more than 90 percent of Moroccans were aware of the campaign and almost three quarters of citizens participated in some way. Among those who supported the campaign, 95 percent targeted Central Danone, 78 percent targeted Sidi Ali, and 52 percent targeted Afriquia, according to l'economiste<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Nadia SALAH, « Enquête L'Économiste-Sunergia/Boycott: Danone, un cas très spécial », l'Économiste, N°:5279 Le 2018/05/24. <https://boycott.leconomiste.com/article/-1028758enquete-l-economiste-sunergia-boycott-danone-un-cas-tres-special>



The boycott seems to be a youth-driven collective action as almost 93 percent of the participants, in a survey commissioned by l'economiste, aged between 15 and 24 were aware of the boycott campaign. Seventy percent within this category actively participated in the boycott. The number falls to 31 percent for the older generations (55+ years old). These results can be explained by the strong mobilization of the youth – the most affected by the current politics – via various social media platforms. They make up the category of citizens most affected by unemployment, which has turned many of them into serving as the driving force in different forms of activism. The youth are heavily connected in Morocco through social media, keeping in mind that about 20 million Moroccans use the internet and about 12 million are on Facebook. The number of mobile phone users exceeds the number of the total population, with around 44 million 4G mobile smart phone users. Since these youth are also consumers, we can say that these critical consumers use this online activism as a strategy for social change.

The most important interference is a manifesto published by various intellectuals<sup>3</sup> and civil society activists calling for the suspension of the boycott after the companies dropped the prices.

## INFLUENCING FACTORS OR POLICY WINDOWS

Discrediting the company owners by highlighting their use of their political capital to generate profit in business was a decisive element in fueling the campaign. Boycotters have perceived them as benefiting from their political capital (political connections with the state; maybe with the exception of Danone though it is in my opinion benefiting from our strong economic relations with France) to maximize their economic interests at the expense of the consumers. Subsequently, boycotters evoked the results of a report, disclosed by the parliament in August 2018, showing an increase in margins earned by fuel distributors since the liberalization of prices in 2015, with some estimates suggest that the fuel distribution companies earned around 17 billion dirhams more than they earned before the abolition of the subsidies on fuel. This soft activism has proved very successful in touching the heart of the political game in Morocco after the Arab Spring, which is regular citizens condemning the links between wealth and politics. The dismissal of Benkirane was meant to pave the way for either a weak government with a weak prime minister or prepare the way for the owner of Afriquia Gas Station, Akhennouch, to lead

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry>

the government of 2021. The king could not do much especially after the dismissal of several ministers after the Rif Hirak. Danone Centrale made considerable efforts to explain their position in its communications, and thereby trying to absorb the anger of consumers.

## TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

During a question-and-answer session at the parliament in Rabat on April 25, Finance Minister Mohamed Bousaid (RNI) said “We have to encourage Moroccan companies and products, which is not the case for some morons who are calling for a boycott of structured companies employing staff and paying their taxes.” The word morons (Modawakhine) seem to have cost him his position in August when the king sacked him. The head of government, Saad Eddine El Othmani, and other PJD ministers asserted inconsistent views on the boycott. In contrast, it was only the secretary-general of the Progress and Socialism Party (PPS) Nabil Benabdellah<sup>4</sup>, who supported the campaign. In a video<sup>5</sup> widely circulated on social media, Benabdellah said that the boycott is a spontaneous expression of people who have been suffering due to the high cost of living in the country.

The government’s multi-positions pushed the boycotters to adopt more hardline positions. For instance, when Minister of Governance Lahcen Daoudi protested with Danone workers against the campaign, the boycotters escalated their demands and called for his resignation. Under pressure emanating from ‘virtual protest’, Daoudi sent his resignation to the royal palace a few days later. Yet, the palace seems to have refused the resignation. But since that incident, Daoudi lost credibility in the eyes of citizens, including members of his own party.

Moreover, businessman-turned-agriculture minister and head of the RNI political party, Akhanouch, has been marginalized because of the boycott campaign, after he was considered, for months, as a ‘super minister’ inside the government. His party canceled several planned rallies and meetings with its constituency before making a comeback during a public meeting with his party’s youth on September 22. A news outlet even predicted that he was politically “dead”. This statement appears bold because Akhanouch and his allies in the palace, are still in power; and the campaign failed to shake up his power as the main target of the campaign. By October 20, he appeared with the king in an ‘exceptional meeting’ to discuss “agricultural employment.”

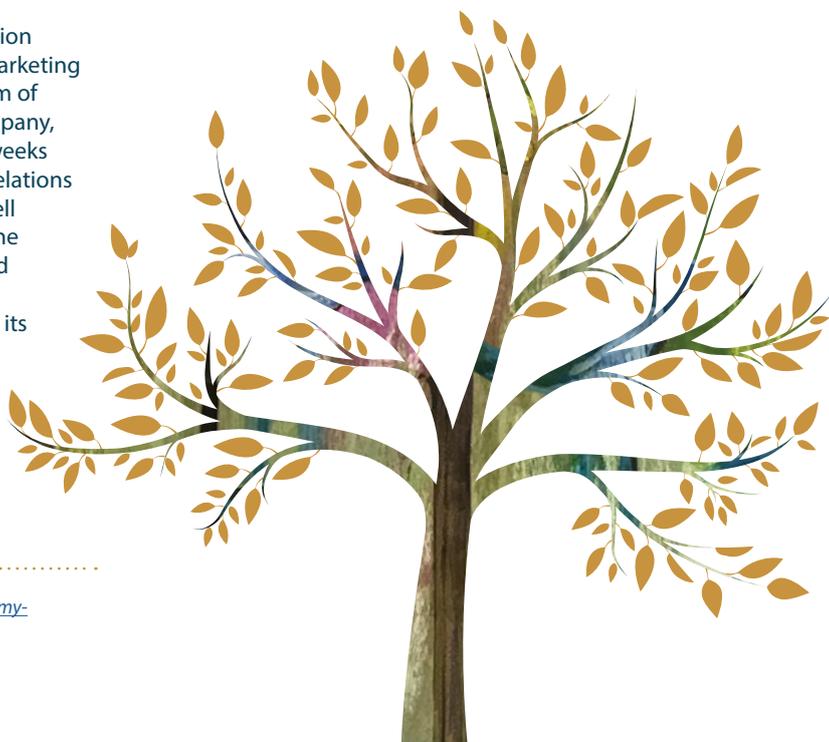
## POLICY OUTCOME

The most important policy outcome was the communication campaign done by the company Danone. Its Moroccan marketing director initially attacked the boycotters and accused them of ‘treason’. This led to an online wave of criticism of the company, which pushed him to apologize for his statement. A few weeks later, the company CEO visited Morocco to lead a public relations campaign while communicating with policy-makers as well as some relevant actors of the civil society. He promised the boycotters to maintain dialogue and find a middle-ground solution. After weeks of dialogue with citizens, including boycotters, the company decided to decrease the price of its

products in September. Up to November 2018, it is difficult to assess how much financial harm the campaign has caused to the three companies. According to Central Danone’s own data, the company lost more than a third of its productivity and sales, which is more than \$150 million USD within a few weeks after the campaign was launched. It decreased the number of its staff, especially seasonal workers, and cut milk provision from small cooperatives by third. The Moroccan subsidiary of Centrale Danone announced a net loss of MAD 538 million in 2018. The company’s gross revenue amounted to MAD 4.76 billion, down 27 percent compared to 2017. The exact data about Sidi Ali and Afriquia were difficult to obtain. However, according to Challenge Magazine the company’s turnover fell by -17.79 percent compared to the same period of 2017, amounting to 738 million DH (-17.79 percent compared to 2017). The boycott also affected the operating result, which fell by 73.13 percent to 36.27 million dirhams and the net profit, or group share, which fell by 87.91 percent to 9.74 million dirhams. CDG Capital Bourse stated that at the end of June 2018, the company’s operational indicators reflect the impact of the boycott campaign targeting the Sidi Ali brand among other consumer products. For its part, the Mineral Waters of Oulmès had issued an alert on its results in June 2018.

## CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The boycott was a successful movement that pushed the companies to react by reducing the prices, communicating with people and bearing the huge financial losses of the boycott. Moreover, the state reacted by introducing a policy of prices and activating the body responsible for controlling prices in Morocco, le Conseil de la Concurrence. One of the major lessons learned is the virtual identity of the movement made it a success, since it has no political/ideological identity, so everybody can join in with no fear of imprisonment. Since the initiators of the boycott campaign in Morocco remain anonymous and online, and since there is an online/virtual public sphere, the initial reaction of the state, political parties and labor unions was as if there was nothing going on. The movement in this case went beyond the classical ways of mobilization. What is interesting too is that the boycott was not against the monarchy or the government but against the symbols of rentier wealth-gathering. It was against the lack of transparent division between wealth and politics, and was really more about the consequences of political connections.



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N43va7K1PDg>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/246931/05/2018/prices-economy-moroccan-boycott/>

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<https://www.averty.me/public-research/averty-survey-boycott-campaign-morocco>

## BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

## THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

## THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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