

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

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

Country: **Morocco**

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The 2016 Rif Hirak: The Socio-Economic Marginalization of the Rif Region | Rachid Touhtou |

BACKGROUND

The 2016 social movement known as the Rif Hirak that occurred in the north of Morocco was triggered by the death of a fishmonger in a garbage truck, sparking a movement calling for social, economic and cultural demands. This new social movement, which erupted after the 20 February movement, has specific objectives, leadership, strategies and tactics. The objectives were mainly economic and then become political and cultural. It was a call for more socio-economic projects in the Rif region. From the beginning, Nasser Zefzafi emerged as a charismatic leader. The strategies were mainly street protests, and proximity and pressure on the government and the king.

The Hirak went transnational, with the Moroccan diaspora expressing its solidarity with the Hirak. Repression and violent interventions from the police ended the momentum of the Hirak, with its main leaders being imprisoned. Al-Hoceima, located in the northern Rif region, is ethnically Berber and people say they have long been marginalized. Thousands of Moroccans marched in the northern town of Al-Hoceima to protest against injustice and corruption on Thursday, May 18, seven months after a fishmonger was crushed inside a garbage truck while trying to retrieve fish confiscated by the police. Waving banners proclaiming "Are you a government or a gang?" and local protest flags, the march made its way peacefully through the center of Al-Hoceima, packing the main square under the watch of police and gendarmerie checkpoints. The incident sparked outrage against hogra, a colloquial Darija Arabic term for contempt or deprivation of dignity.

TIMELINE

On October 28, 2016, a young fish merchant, Mohcine Fikri (31 years old), died by being crushed in a dumpster while trying to save his goods which had just been seized by the authorities.

On October 30, demonstrations took place against the hogra in the main cities of the country in tribute to Mohcine Fikri. On April 27, the Al-Hoceima Court of First Instance sentenced seven people who were involved in the death of Mohcine Fikri to several months of imprisonment. On May 18, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Al-Hoceima against the hogra. On May 26, Nasser Zefzafi, the main voice of the Rif People's Movement, interrupted the Friday sermon in the Mohamed V mosque in Al-Hoceima. A video of the event showed Zefzafi shouting in the mosque and interrupting the Friday sermon, accusing the imam leading the Friday sermon of complicity with the authorities and abusing the sermon by accusing the Hirak leaders of creating fitna (division among Muslims). Zefzafi can be seen in the video angrily speaking about the abuse of attacking the Rif leaders inside a mosque that is supposed to be neutral, from Zefzafi's point of view.

Authorities took advantage of this altercation to arrest participants in the popular Rif movement. On May 29, Nasser Zefzafi is arrested after three days of flight following the interruption of the Friday sermon. On June 11, massive opposition emerged from leftist parties, critical NGOs and Islamists of Justice and Spirituality, in support of the demands of the Rif People's Movement and the detainees. In a July 29 speech, the king castigated the negligence of the political class and the failings of the administration. On August 8, Ilyas El Omari (a native politician from Al-Hoceima and the mayor of the city) announced his resignation from the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) National Secretariat. On October 24, the king dismissed several ministers, secretaries of state and high-ranking officials.

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTOR'S ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT

A commission of the Moroccan Coalition of Human Rights Institutes (CMIDH), which brings together various NGOs, traveled to Al-Hoceima from 6 to 8 June to investigate the situation in the region, meet the families of the Hirak detainees, and inquire

about possible violations reported by local activists. The results of this survey were presented Wednesday, June 21, 2017 in Rabat. In its report, the commission established that there had been “a disproportionate use of force.” It also notes “the use of tear gas bombs” by the police. The report of the investigation mentions “apparent traces of violence on the detainees during their appearance in the court of Al Hoceima on June.”

The public prosecutor’s office had ordered medical examinations to investigate these cases, and promised “firm application of the law” in case of abuses committed by the police. A visit permit was granted to lawyers to meet the accused. The report of the collective of 22 associations also evokes “violent police raids in the street at late hours and stone throwing on the windows of homes.” Based on these findings, the coalition issued 32 recommendations to overcome the crisis in the Rif. These recommendations are categorized according to their urgency. In the immediate future, the CMIDH called for “the release of all detainees from Hirak and the abandonment of prosecutions”, in order to “restore a climate of trust conducive to the debate between the protagonists in the region.”

The coalition also recommended “the opening of a judicial inquiry into the attacks on the inhabitants of Al Hoceima referred to in the report.” The coalition report regrets the lack of response from the authorities with whom it came into contact. On the economic, social and cultural level, the CMIDH advocates “the upgrading of infrastructure in the Rif”, and calls for attracting industrial investment, while recalling that “the region had 52 industrial units during the colonial period, against no [sic] currently.” The commission hopes to present its inquiry report to the parliament and the Ministry of Human Rights.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Right from the beginning, “Live Messenger” was used to cover the movement and the speeches of the leaders, mainly Nasser Zefzafi. As crowds gathered in one square, Nasser Zefzafi, leader of the Hirak rallied protesters over a megaphone. He has been the target of attacks in pro-palace media, who have accused him of being a separatist for the Rif region. The anger over Fikri’s death, which shocked even staunch supporters of the palace, was a reminder of the broader resentment at the establishment over unemployment and the gap between rich and poor that partly drove the 2011 pro-democracy protests. “Fikri’s death woke the Rif up from a deep sleep” argued the activist in the Hirak Rabih Boushaoul for many journalists. One of the main strategies used by the leaders of the movement and mainly Nasser Zefzafi was the recovering of the golden past of the Rif leader Abdelkarim Al Khattabi, the nationalist leader against Spanish colonialism. This recreation of



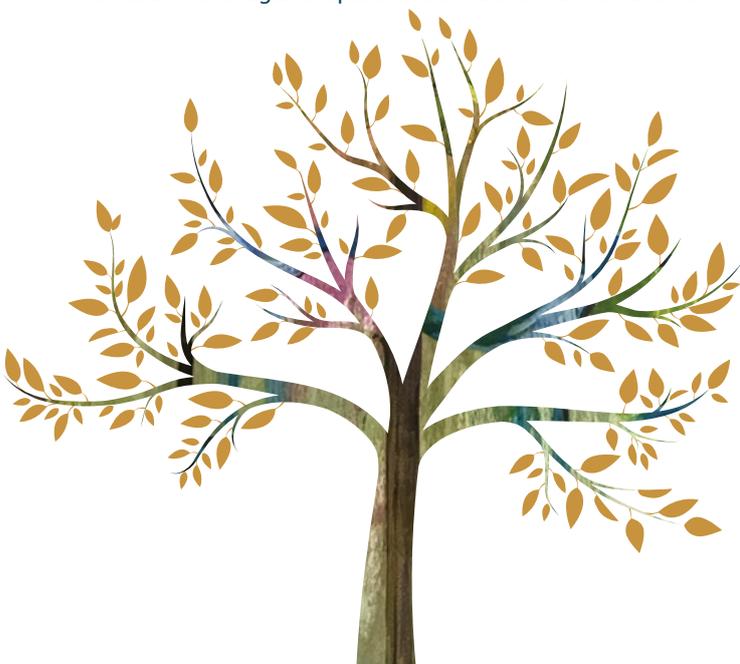
the past and its linking to the present fueled the needed energy for the activists and the masses to join the Hirak.

The second strategy was the use of a conservative religious discourse to attract and mobilize the masses because the city is known to be a conservative city. Zefzafi used a conservative discourse from the beginning as he was aware of the conservative nature of the Rif region. According to the prosecutor, the protest leader on Friday stopped “the preacher from continuing his sermon, giving a provocative speech in which he insulted the imam and fomented disturbances that undermined the calm and sacredness of the place of worship.” Mobile phone footage shared on Facebook showed Zefzafi calling the imam a “liar”, asking whether mosques were built for God or those in power, and slamming “those who want to make the Rif capitulate.” A relative of Zefzafi said the protest leader had managed to escape arrest as he left the mosque on Friday. The third strategy is the call for “free people” as he used to say to sympathize with the movement, to express solidarity and not to be isolated as a movement; leaders of the movement were aware of the weight of the Rif diaspora in Western Europe to convince them to pressure the regime and to support the leaders internationally.

Shortly after, in footage broadcast on social media, the leader appeared on his rooftop in Al-Hoceima surrounded by supporters, saying: “I’m not scared. If they want to arrest me, let them come.” The whereabouts of Nasser Zefzafi were unclear on Saturday. In another video posted afterwards, he said he was “safe and sound” and called for peaceful demonstrations. His supporters said on Facebook his home had been searched. A source at the Ministry of Interior said Zefzafi had not been arrested, adding that young protesters had thrown stones at security forces on Friday in the city of some 56,000 inhabitants. Official news agency MAP said clashes between demonstrators and police wounded several people, including three members of the security forces who were seriously injured. Interior Minister Abdelouafi Laftit led a large government delegation on a visit to Al-Hoceima on Monday, May 22, the latest trip to the region to promise projects to boost the local economy

Influencing factors or policy windows

On October 17, 2015, the province benefited from a very important development program launched by King Mohammed VI, namely Al-Hoceima Manarat Al Moutawassit. Six-and-a-half MAD billion



was mobilized to provide the province and especially the city of Al-Hoceima large equipment to enhance its attractiveness. When the crisis broke out in October 2016, the economic and social situation of Al-Hoceima, with one of the lowest local development indexes, increased discontent and the feeling of abandonment among the population, and facilitated the emergence of social protest. Thus, the lack of opportunities for a population that is mainly young and of working age (64.1 percent), with a rate of unemployment of 16.3 percent (above the national average), and with 25.1 percent dependent on family assistance, meant that the death of Fikri became a grievance for the whole of local society and that the protests were widely supported.

The most important and decisive influencing factors leading to policy windows in my view was the call from known activists and intellectuals, who called for meeting the Rif protestors' 'legitimate' demands. The Rif Hirak started to become a national cause and not only an ethnic, isolated case. The initiative was launched by Moroccan intellectuals and human rights and civil society activists calling on the government to satisfy the demands of protesters in Rif. The initiative issued a communiqué on Thursday, May 25, saying the social, economic and cultural demands of protesters are "legitimate." Signatories of the communiqué included writer and Amazigh activist Ahmed Assid, poet Salah El Ouadie, university professor Amina El Messaoudi, and human rights activists Khadija Marouazi and Mohamed Neshnash.

Signatories to the communiqué said the protest movement "has been peaceful," adding that the movement's demands can be satisfied "if there is truly a will to engage in a 'serious' dialogue with them." They called on "political actors to draw lessons" from the dynamic created by the protest movement and abstain from "accusations of treason" directed at the movement. The communiqué stated that a diagnosis of the dysfunctions that led to the protests and dialogue "is the best way to deal with the demands," insisting that "dialogue is not the end itself" and that its success depends on how much the state can deliver in terms of implementing the objectives agreed upon with the protesters. "The process of reconciliation with the Rif region, which has been victim of many human rights violations, has to be completed," reads the communiqué. "The demands movement has to be dealt with consideration of social peace. The rights of citizens have to be guaranteed, including the right to peaceful protests." A call was issued to the government to speed up the realization of projects and a development program in the city of Al-Hoceima, including the establishment of a university hospital in the region.

This communiqué of intellectuals helped in finding a breach of hope to include a third party to play the role of intermediation. It was a window of opportunity for both the movement and the state to go beyond the impasse of non-negotiation and violence. The same intellectuals and civil society activists are now trying to push for reconciliation and a royal pardon of the prisoners. By the end of the 2019 Ramadan, about 147 imprisoned activist of the Hirak benefited from a royal pardon.

TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

The Death of Mohcine Fikri gave birth to a dormant movement. However, the mosque interruption by Nasser Zefzafi is a transformative moment in the movement. Moroccan authorities announced on Friday, May 26, the arrest of the leader of the popular protest in the Rif region, Nasser Zefzafi, but his relatives said he managed to escape the police. According to AFP, who questioned the Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufiq, Zefzafi was arrested in a mosque in the city of Al-Hoceima "after interrupting the preaching of the Imam during the Friday prayer, a serious crime." A close friend of Zefzafi who wished to remain anonymous,

for his part claimed that he had managed to escape the authorities. Facebook profiles of the supporters of the movement of Zefzafi have reported from their side of an "attempt to arrest," says AFP.

In a video Zefzafi posted on his Facebook page on Friday, Zefzafi argued that he spoke "in the name of the poor" and "left out" attacked an imam in a mosque in the city. He blames the Imam for asking the faithful to avoid fitna. His accusations are violent: "He is in the pay of the Makhzen. He accuses us of encouraging fitna, while our young people have nothing to eat!" In classical Arabic he accuses him of failing in his mission of preaching. In a counter-example, he quotes a former caliph of Islam, Omar Ibn El Khattab, who was "so fair" that he asked his subjects to prevent him if he "ever deviated from the right path." He ends his words as a martyr: "I am not afraid of anyone except Allah. Stop me, I will continue to denounce the injustice!" After this event, the police encircled the Zefzafi neighborhood in an attempt to catch him, which was met by violence by those trying to protect him.

With the help of social media networks, he became the icon of an uprising that has continued to grow in this historically-rebellious region. Fierce, unpredictable, he defies officials who land in numbers in this city to try to calm the population. On his Facebook page, he does not hesitate to threaten the officials: "I warn you. We are on the eve of Ramadan. And as you know, sardine is very consumed in this holy month. If its price exceeds 7 dirhams, we will walk to the port," he said with in the background a portrait of the leader of the Rif, Abdelkrim Khattabi.

POLICY OUTCOME

Government ministers travelled to the region to meet the elected leaders and accelerate the realization of infrastructure and development projects. The king dismissed several ministers and top officials for failing to improve the economic situation in a region shaken by protests but also because of the failure of projects launched by the king in the city. The first important policy outcome was the audit conducted by the minister of interior on the project. The second report was given to the king, conducted by the Accounting Court; the main conclusions were the existence of several dysfunctions in the realization of the project. The same day the king dismissed four ministers and expressed his dissatisfaction against five past ministers who will not be given any official position in the future.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Hirak of the Rif epitomized a moment of confrontation between the central state and the region of the Rif, bringing back memories of dissidence from the golden past of the Rif Republic. The Rif movement demonstrated that small new urban social movements can destabilize the central state and can create its own legitimacy and its own momentum away from formal politics. The discourse, the tactics and the strategies were new and strong and broke away from the exceptional identity of the post-Arab Spring subaltern movements in Morocco; it is a micro marginal social movement; it has leaders, a discourse and tactics. It is a massive movement, mobilizing all people in the city around a leader. The Rif Hirak is a movement, which built its strategies on the disillusionments of the 20 February movement. Despite the fact that the major leaders are now in prison, there is a lively debate round political imprisonment and a pressure from families, Moroccan diaspora and leaders in prisons for a deal with the regime and for the release of the prisoners.

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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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