

## FROM ACTIVISM TO ARTIVISM: NEW FORMS OF YOUTH ACTIVISM IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 20 FEBRUARY MOVEMENT

*Mohamed ElHachimi\**

Like many countries of the MENA region, Morocco witnessed one of the most vigorous and dynamic youth protests in its modern history during the so-called Arab uprisings. On 20 February 2011, thousands of Moroccans gathered in 53 cities to protest against what they deemed despotism, corruption and social inequality. Their main demands were not only political (a democratic constitution expressing popular sovereignty, the dissolution of the parliament, the dismissal of the current government and the establishment of a transitional administration whose primary goal will be to initiate reforms, and an independent judiciary) but also cultural (the recognition of Amazigh as an official language) and socioeconomic (better quality and access to social welfare services, i.e. health, education and housing).

To face this unprecedented form of youth political action, the regime's strategy consisted of containing youth protest by a twofold policy: on the one hand, it conducted what was presented as the most comprehensive and deepest constitutional reform in the history of the country, aiming to establish a system based on a more democratic distribution of power. On the other hand, it tried to demonise and de-legitimise the radicals. Four years later, it seems legitimate to conduct a preliminary assessment of the impact that this strategy may have had on youth activism in Morocco. To this end, this policy brief tries to focus on the way the Moroccan youth movement(s) is adapting itself to the response of the strategy of the regime. In other words, it shows that while the youth movement(s) did not change its strategic objective (parliamentary monarchy) it is progressively

\* Professor of Political Sciences at Ibn Zohr University (Agadir) and researcher at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches en Sciences Sociales (CERSS)

changing the means to achieve it. As an advocacy policy brief, it also seeks to make some relevant recommendations to different stakeholders on how to deal with these dynamics in a way that pushes the ongoing democratisation process forward.

### **The Strategy of the Regime towards the 20 February Movement**

In his speech of 9 March 2011, King Mohamed VI announced what he characterised as a deep and comprehensive reform of the Constitution. The reform project aimed to absorb the anger of the demonstrators by meeting their demands for parliamentary monarchy, social justice and fighting corruption. It revolves around six premises: the confirmation of the pluralist nature of Moroccan identity, the consolidation of the rule of law, the reinforcement of the independence of the judiciary, the consolidation of the separation and balance of powers, reinforcing the role of political parties, consolidation of mechanisms of the protection of human rights and freedoms, as well as good governance. A few months later, the ad hoc consultative committee appointed by the king came up with a text. The king called on the Moroccan people to participate in the referendum held on 31 July, when the voters massively approved the new Constitution.

Regardless of the impact this constitutional reform has had on the practical functioning of the political system, it was a real turning point. The king's speech resulted in splitting the 20 February Movement.<sup>1</sup> While the reforms introduced by the king helped to mobilise the moderates for the state's approach to reform, it paved the way for it to crack down on and demonise the radicals.

It should be noted that the state's approach to the protests was inconsistent. The authorities first allowed the demonstrations to take place and then, on 13 March, only 4 days after the king's speech, police violently cracked down on demonstrators in Casablanca. This repressive approach was subsequently abandoned for a brief period. Then, on 15, 22 and 29 May, police behaviour

<sup>1</sup> Belghazi T., & Abdelhay M. (2015). Iibat: Disillusionment and the Arab Spring in Morocco. *The Journal of North African Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2015.1084097

seemed to confirm that the state's strategy was shifting again towards more violence against the protesters. A few weeks later, on 22 May, which was set to be the fourth national day of mass non-violent demonstration, the repression witnessed in Rabat a week earlier was repeated. The demonstrations were violently dispersed by the police in Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, Agadir and elsewhere, leaving dozens injured and many arrested.

Based on these facts, it can be assumed that the way the security forces have dealt with the demonstrations was in harmony with the security policy adopted since the accession of King Mohamed VI to the throne. Indeed, to prevent criticism of human rights NGOs and its western allies, the state is no longer relying exclusively on its security apparatus and tries to avoid any systematic use of violence. Furthermore, this strategy also seems to feed, to some extent, the broader strategy aimed at dividing the protesters, as explained below.

Besides cracking down on demonstrators, the state used another way of neutralising the 20FM activists. It consisted of demonising some of the radical members of the movement. One example of this soft crackdown was the Casablanca judge's decision to charge the activists for associating with an "illegal movement". This indicates a sharp deviation from the regime's limited tolerance of the movement. Indeed, according to the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH), at least 2,000 activists have been detained by the authorities since the unrest of 2011.<sup>2</sup> Some of them are still behind bars. Most of them were charged and later sentenced for common law crimes like possession of hashish, "humiliating the police" and selling cigarettes without a permit. The use of common law crimes against these activists is widely seen as a pretext that allows authorities to cover up politically-motivated incarceration.

### **Is the 20 February Movement Over?**

The offer made by the king resulted in splitting the 20FM into two main factions: those who were satisfied with the reform promised, who adopted a wait-and-see position, and those who deemed the king's promises too meagre to bring about

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/what-left-morocco-s-february-20-movement-857852436>

real democracy. While the former considered the king's speech a reform opportunity worth trusting, the latter deemed it a mere political manoeuvre aimed at a kind of redeployment of authoritarianism. From this perspective, the constitutional reform was seen as a way to help the regime to maintain its hegemony and bring about a symbolic closure to the revolutionary demands of youths.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, this controversy over the constitutional reform resulted in widening the ideological gap between the already heterogeneous components of the movement, inter alia, moderate Islamists, radical Islamists of the Justice and Charity group, radical leftists of Annahj Ademocrati, non-partisan youths, and others. Describing the gradual decay of the 20FM, Belghazi and Moudden assumed that “this succession of splits led to declining numbers at organised demonstrations. Gradually, it became obvious that the movement had lost its ability to mobilise crowds and attract media coverage.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is striking that its core, however small, remained persistent and is still today considered a real nuisance by the regime. Indeed, the main components of the 20FM seem to be undergoing a progressive metamorphosis through which new forms of activism are emerging out of the confrontation between this movement and the state. These new forms are reincarnations of the 20FM spirit. One of the things that most of these new forms of mobilisation have in common is their use of art as a collective action<sup>5</sup> in order to stimulate critical thinking and, by doing so, to keep the spirit of the movement alive.

### **Guerrilla Cinema: Resistance by Art**

The debate on the relation between cinema and politics is characterised by a sharp polarisation. While some authors believe cinema should be seen as a neutral art, others assume that it can be committed to a particular cause. In this regard, concepts like “political cinema”, “committed cinema”, “third cinema” and “guerrilla cinema” are often opposed to mainstream cinema. This dichotomy can

<sup>3</sup> Belghazi, T., & Moudden, A. (2015). Op. cit. p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Boubia, A (2015). Artivism in the Arab World: a Major Driving Force towards Democracy. *Mediterranean Yearbook 2015*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

be dated back to the 1960s and 1970s when “the emphasis on revolution made by the New Latin American Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s created the stereotype of ‘political cinema’ around which extreme positions have emerged, just as in the political arena.”<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to mainstream cinema, guerrilla filmmaking refers to a form of independent filmmaking characterised by low budgets. It is usually done by independent filmmakers because they do not have the budget to get permits, rent out locations, or build expensive sets, as was the case for the Moroccan version of guerrilla cinema.

Indeed, in the wake of the Arab Spring, inspired by some successful experiences of artistic resistance, some former members of the 20FM created a new movement based on the idea of using independent documentary filmmaking as a form of civil disobedience. The members of Guerrilla Cinema present this initiative as a continuation of their struggle for democracy when they were marching as 20FM activists. Their goals revolve around awareness-raising, developing critical thinking and bringing their own version of what is happening in Morocco to an international audience. On the homepage of their website, they clearly present themselves as “an artistic resistance for freedom of expression in Morocco.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, by defying what they deem as censorship, they seem to have put the notion of change at the core of their movement. In this regard, they overtly assert:

We don't believe in censorship and Moroccan filmmaking laws. Cameras are our weapons. We believe that the Centre Cinematographique Marocain is a corporatist institution designed, under tyranny, to control Moroccan films and contain or censor any critique against the Makhzen. In the spirit of peaceful disobedience, we shoot films and encourage others to shoot films without authorisation as a form of protest.<sup>8</sup>

6 Arias-Herrera, J.C. & Roncallo, S. (2013). Cinema and/as Revolution: The New Latin American Cinema. *Observatorio (OBS) Journal*, 7(3), pp. 093-114.

7 <http://www.radicalfilmnetwork.com/morocco.html>

8 *Ibid.*

One of the founding members of Guerrilla Cinema, Youness Belghazi, who was once an active member of 20FM, no longer marches. Now, Belghazi said, “he uses the camera he held firmly in his lap as his weapon against the injustices he says his country faces.”<sup>9</sup> This is consistent with one of the main goals for which the movement was created, which is to expose stories not told by traditional news outlets, which are controlled by the Moroccan government. It is worth mentioning that the members of Guerrilla Cinema have created short films, some individually and some in smaller film crews. These include: *The Mask*, *Uprooted*, *475 le Film*,<sup>10</sup> and *Basta!*

### Political Podcasts

It is widely known that communications technology has become one of the key factors shaping both domestic and international politics. However, there is no agreement among scholars on the nature of the role it plays and its democratic potential in developing countries. The abundant literature on the political role of communications technology remains, to a large extent, dominated by considerations pertaining to the western context.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is usually seen as a tool to strengthen deliberative and participatory democracy. Obviously, if such a paradigm applies to western established democracies, it does not seem to be relevant when it comes to understanding the role of communications technology in the developing countries.

To prevent any misleading generalisations, Norris suggests an alternative model that takes the difference between developed and developing contexts into consideration. For instance, when analysing the role of internet in developing countries, she assumes that the emphasis should be put on the way internet can strengthen pluralistic competition among potential parties, consolidate civil and

<sup>9</sup> Shirk, A. Guerrilla filmmakers celebrate anniversary of Morocco’s Arab uprising. Accessible at: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/rights/guerrilla-filmmakers-use-illegal-documentaries-celebrate-feb-20-a>

<sup>10</sup> One of their projects, *475 le Film*, tells the story of Amina Filali, who killed herself in 2012 after being forced to marry her alleged rapist. The name comes from Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which stated that charges could be dropped in cases of statutory rape if the two parties get married.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Moussa, M. (2011). *The Use of Internet by Social Movements in Morocco: Implications for Collective Action and Political Change*. Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, p. 80.

political liberties and civil society institutions, and promote transparency and decision-making processes.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, it can be argued that internet has been playing a significant role in letting voices of marginalised youth activists be heard in the aftermath of the 20FM, as the proliferation of political podcasts shows. One of the famous podcasts in the post-2011 Morocco is called Tsoulisme.<sup>13</sup> It was named after the humorist Mohamed Tsouli. This former 20FM activist launched dozens of videos on YouTube that have been watched by thousands of Moroccans. Such an initiative significantly contributed to reviving the enthusiasm for political debate, the calls for freedom of speech and the release of political prisoners. “We were busy with demonstrations and general assemblies. The 20FM has moulded. It is nowadays more than a protest movement. Its spirit has been reincarnated by several creations. One of them is the podcast,” said Mohamed Tsouli.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, Mohamed Tsouli’s success lies in his ability to mix sarcasm and politics. This has led to emulators among his fellows resulting in what some observers consider a collective frenzy. In this regard, Tsoulisme was a real stimulus that encouraged the youths to use internet as a tool to take part in public debate and to denounce human rights violations. One of them is Mehdi Bousaid, the founder of the initiative Al qiraaa lil jamii (reading for all). Mehdi organised a dozen cultural events in different Moroccan cities. He explains the choice he made to deal with cultural issues rather than political ones because he thinks culture is the cornerstone of raising youth political awareness. “I have chosen culture precisely because it is hated by our politicians who prefer and encourage ignorance in order to protect their interests. I still believe that culture is the first step towards politics,” argued Mehdi Bousaid.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly enough, this was used to mobilise public opinion and to exert pressure on different levels of the decision-making process in the country. One

12 Norris, P. (2001). *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge, UK, and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

13 <http://tsoulisme-ma.blogspot.com/>

14 *Ibid.*

15 <https://salahelayoubi.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/quand-le-podcast-redonne-son-second-souffle-a-la-contestation/>

example is worth mentioning to illustrate the impact this kind of activism has had. When a Spanish paedophile was granted a royal pardon in 2013, youth activists massively used podcasts and different forms of social media to mobilise Moroccans against the royal decision. This campaign pushed the king to take the unprecedented decision to withdraw his pardon.

### **Democratic Advocacy**

Another form of re-incarnation of the 20FM spirit is a number of associations founded in the aftermath of the “Moroccan Spring”. Many of these associations are strongly linked to 20FM. They are not only inspired by its “ideology” but were also founded by some of its former members.

The Anfas democratic movement is a political association founded in September 2013. Given its objectives and the background of many of its founding members, this movement can be considered as a prolongation of the 20FM. Indeed, in its political platform, it is clearly stated that the rationale behind the creation of this movement lies in the fact that “the momentum produced by this democratic revival has not led to any significant change on the wider political scale.”<sup>16</sup>

According to the founders of Anfas, the existing political structures and elite groups are “unable to accelerate the democratisation process which will bring Morocco into a new era.”<sup>17</sup>

As for its objectives, Anfas struggles to establish a parliamentary monarchy as a way to bring about real democracy in Morocco. In the political platform they drafted, the founding members of Anfas made it clear that the reason why they gather is:

“to work on making Morocco a country which can learn and move on from the traditional Makhzen system towards a democratic

---

<sup>16</sup> The full name of this association is “Anfas democratic movement, Morocco we wish for”. The text of the manifesto it issued is available at: [www.anfas.ma](http://www.anfas.ma)  
<sup>17</sup> More details can be found at: [www.anfas.ma](http://www.anfas.ma)



parliamentary monarchy where the king reigns and does not govern. A system directly chosen by the people, respecting the separation of powers, and promoting accountability and popular oversight.”<sup>18</sup>

In order to address the confusion over the objectives of the democratisation process, Anfas emphasises that democracy is as much a system based on electoral competition as it is a society with strong moral values. This inextricable bond cannot be broken.

In the same fashion, the Institut Prometheus pour la démocratie et les droits humains was created in June 2013 by some of the former activists of the 20FM. Their objectives are quite similar to those of Anfas. They mainly revolve around popular education, the monitoring of public policies, extending education and the culture of human rights in youth areas, and promoting human rights culture among young people.<sup>19</sup>

In both examples, Anfas and Prometheus were tolerated by the state and they did not face any constraints in pursuing their objectives. Indeed, from the state perspective, this new trend means that former activists of the 20FM are likely to be absorbed by these kinds of associations, which work under close control of the Ministry of the Interior. From the point of view of these young activists, these forms of activism may reflect a mere tactical shift in their struggle for change. Indeed, their engagement in civil society may be a way to “build a popular base and try to trigger change at the grassroots level.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Alternative Media: the Battle of Information**

Mamfakinch, which in Moroccan dialect means “no concession” or “not giving in”, is a Moroccan alternative media outlet founded by democracy activists during the Arab Spring. It was launched shortly before the 20 February protests as a way to disseminate information about the demonstrations themselves. Thereafter, it became one of the major sources for citizens to gain awareness of topics not discussed in the state-run media.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/institutprometheus/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/institutprometheus/info/?tab=page_info)

<sup>20</sup> Engelcke, D., Morocco's changing civil society. Accessible at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/fa=62417>

The founders of Mamfakinch strongly believe that democracy and freedom of expression are inextricably interlinked and cannot exist without each another. Hence, they believe Mamfakinch does not seek to create good citizens as the state defines them but wants to redefine citizenship and reshape the state through the establishment of democracy. To start this revolution, Mamfakinch attempts to provide the public with information that would otherwise be unavailable.

Interestingly enough, Mamfakinch supported a number of domestic causes, including reform, anticorruption, transparency, democratisation and the rights of women, as well as international causes like Palestinian statehood, while always keeping the organisations' theme at the forefront: that all recent changes by the Moroccan government are nothing more than cosmetic.

Acting with this critical spirit, Mamfakinch is widely seen as a real alternative media website in Morocco. It seems to have been a source of concern for the Moroccan state, which tried to limit its impact. Indeed, the website was temporarily shut down on 13 July 2012 due to surveillance malware unknowingly downloaded via email. An anonymous source sent a document supposedly containing scandalous information about a Moroccan politician. The document instead tracked emails, Skype conversations and documents downloaded to all the workers' computers.<sup>21</sup>

In 2012, Mamfakinch won the joint Google and Global Voices Breaking Borders Award along with the website Atlatzo.hu. In 2014, the founders of this alternative media outlet decided to temporarily shut the website down, arguing that it was no longer able to play the role for which it was created in 2011.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The main argument of this policy brief is that the strategy of the Moroccan state seems to have succeeded in containing the 20FM, but it has fallen short of

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20140414-when-governments-attack>

<sup>22</sup> The reasons behind this decision were explained in an article accessible on the link: <https://www.mamfakinch.com/>

eliminating it from the social-political landscape. Obviously, the reforms conducted by the state have helped stabilise the country. However, their impact in democratising the political system remains doubtful, inasmuch as they do not seem to be accepted by all the components of the Moroccan youth movement and by the population at large. Hence, the disappearance of the 20FM from Moroccan streets does not necessarily mean the movement has disappeared. Rather, it seems to be adapting itself to deal with the challenges of the response of the Moroccan state in 2011.

In this regard, it can be argued that the new forms of youth activism have shown great potential in changing the political and socioeconomic conditions of youths in Morocco over the last four years. Three examples are worth mentioning to illustrate this role. Firstly, the new forms of youth activism described above are playing a key role as awareness-raising tools, especially by posting and sharing their audiovisual products (short films, plays, podcasts, and so on) via social media. Secondly, as shown above, they successfully used social media and other platforms to pressure the government and to have a greater say in the decision-making process. Thirdly, they are increasingly participating in the ongoing public debate.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of their commitment to legal and peaceful means in pursuing their goals, the actors of these new forms of youth activism are usually subject to different restrictions hindering them from freely expressing themselves. Given these conclusions, it seems relevant to address a few recommendations to local as well as international stakeholders:

- The initiatives taken so far, including the reform of the Constitution, are widely seen by youths as ostensible reforms designed to shake off criticism from international partners while the authorities continue to suppress protests. The Moroccan state needs to take this criticism into consideration. To this end, it is highly recommended to set up strong political mechanisms to integrate youths into the political life of the country.

---

<sup>23</sup> The Anfas movement is playing a leading role as a public debate platform. It organised several conferences and training on various issues, inter alia, women empowerment, youth political participation, municipal elections held in September 2015.

- The Moroccan state needs to change its strategy of dealing with protesters and bring its security approach in line with international standards. In other words, peaceful protest must be allowed to take place without harassment or repression and with full respect for human rights.
- In light of the above, the European Union, the United States and other Moroccan partners need to undertake a thorough assessment of the feasibility of their objectives in the field of democracy promotion vis-à-vis the country. Their programmes do not seem to take into account the changing nature of youth activism in the post-2011 era in Morocco. While they are still supporting service-provider associations, which offer no contribution to the democratisation process, the programmes dedicated to supporting politically-motivated forms of youth activism fall short of expectations.