



The Moroccan grind

Despite similarities to the Tunisian scenario, protests over the horrific death of a fishmonger are unlikely to expand into a broader challenge to the regime

ON OCTOBER 28, Mohsin Fikhri, a 31-year-old fish monger in the northern Moroccan city of Al Hoceima, was deliberately crushed to death in a garbage truck as he frantically sought to retrieve his valuable, confiscated swordfish, following his reported refusal to pay a bribe to police officers in return for permission to sell the protected species.

The horrific scene was captured on a cellphone, in which the command “*T’han amu*” (“Grind him” in Moroccan Arabic) was distinctly heard. The video quickly went viral, along with the hashtag “#*t’han amu*,” sparking the largest series of mass protests in Morocco since the “Democracy Spring” demonstrations of 2011.

Calls for “justice for the *shahid*” (“martyr”) were coupled with broader condemnations of *hogra*, the systematic contempt that the authorities display toward ordinary people.

Observers quickly noted the similarity between Fikhri’s death and that of Tunisia’s Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in December 2010 lit the spark of the Arab Spring upheavals that have roiled the region ever since. Was the Tunisian scenario about to be replayed in Morocco?

The answer is no, for a number of reasons.

The 2011 protests, which had called for “reform” of the existing system but not for its overthrow, had been adroitly defanged by King Mohammed VI.

Capitalizing on the monarchy’s considerable degree of legitimacy among Morocco’s 35 million people, he quickly seized the initiative, proffering a new constitution that promised more power to parliament and articulated a vision of a tolerant, multi cultural society proud of its traditions while being open to the world. The process was capped by parliamentary elections in November 2011 in which the Islamist Party of Justice and Development garnered the largest percentage of votes (approximately 25% of the total), and its head, Abdelilah Benkirane, being named prime minister as head of a coalition government. Just over one month ago, Benkirane’s PJD repeated its electoral success.

However, as the latest protests indicated, not all is well in the Moroccan body politic.

The much-ballyhooed reforms turned out to be cosmetic, as the real power and wealth in the country remains in the hands of the palace and its allied economic, administrative and security elites. Unemployment and under-employment, especially among youth, remains high, exacerbated by a poor fit between a largely Arabized education system and the requirement for fluency in French for most better paying jobs in the modern



Protesters raise a poster of Riffian Berber hero Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi during a protest, November 6, against the death of a fishmonger in the Moroccan city of Al Hoceima

economic sector. Illiteracy, especially among rural women, is high, as well. Corruption is rampant, cynicism rife, and the desire to emigrate widespread among the youth.

There was also an ethnic dimension to the protests. The unfortunate victim was a Riffian Berber, one of Morocco’s three main Berber (Amazigh) ethno-linguistic groups, which together constitute upwards of 40% of the population. The northern Rif region has historically been neglected and alienated from the centers of Moroccan authority, which in 1958-59 employed brutal force in suppressing a rebellion there that is still remembered today.

DURING THE 2011 protests, five demonstrators were trapped and died in a fire that is widely believed to have been perpetrated by the police. As was true in 2011, the flag of the Riffian hero Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi, who led a five-year rebellion during the 1920s against Spanish and French colonialism, has been displayed in the latest protests. Flags of the Amazigh identity movement as a whole also have been prominent in the protests, indicating Amazigh activism is alive and percolating.

So why isn’t this likely to turn into a broader challenge? The authorities’ response was finely calibrated. The episode, they quickly acknowledged, was an unfortunate tragedy, and

the king ordered a full investigation of the event; the police refrained from suppressing the protests; Benkirane explicitly instructed his party members not to participate in the protests; and a senior party delegation paid a condolence call on the grieving family. Finally, 11 persons were charged with offenses, including two Interior Ministry officials and two fisheries officials, suggesting that people were going to be held accountable for Fikhri's death.

For Morocco, the timing was especially sensitive, as it prepared to host the

COP 22 UN-sponsored climate change conference in Marrakesh. With protesters already carrying signs such as "Welcome to COP 22. We grind people here," it behooved the authorities to move quickly to assuage and contain the protests.

More generally, the Moroccan public appears to have neither the organizational cohesion nor the stomach to undertake a sustained challenge to the existing socioeconomic and political order. The results of such protests elsewhere in the region reinforce this reluctance.

So, for now, Moroccan authorities appear to have sufficient tools and sophistication to contain the discontent. But the failure to address the fundamental grievances and ills that beset Moroccan society can be ignored only at the regime's peril. ■

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