



Protest Movements and Social Media: Morocco's February 20 Movement

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Abstract

Historically, Morocco experienced large-scale political repression during the 1970s through the early 1990s. Through its actions, the regime repressed any claims aimed at challenging its authoritarian configuration of public space. Ironically, with the emergence of the 'February 20' movement, those claims were brought back again on to the political agenda. Born in the context of the Arab Spring, February 20 acquired legitimacy both nationally and regionally. Its use of civic and political forms of expression in order to conquer the social arena reflects not only a certain inefficiency of traditional representative bodies (political parties, official media and parliament) but also a relative emergency to convey their message. The leading technological means of communication used by the movement are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blogs. The young used these tools not only to promote the movement per se, but also to facilitate its operational organization by informing policy makers, activists and even supporters of the movement nation-wide. This article tries to assess the extent to which the social media platforms utilized by the February 20 movement were a political game changer for a generation eager for freedom and change after decades of oppression in Morocco.

Résumé

Sur le plan historique, le Maroc a connu une répression politique à grande échelle au cours des années 1970 jusqu'au début des années 1990. Le régime a pris des mesures pour réprimer toutes les revendications visant à contester sa configuration autoritaire de l'espace public. Ironiquement, avec l'émergence du mouvement du «20 février», ces revendications ont été remises à l'ordre du jour politique. Né dans le contexte du printemps arabe, le 20 février a acquis une légitimité à l'échelle nationale et régionale. L'utilisation de formes civiques et politiques d'expression pour conquérir le domaine social reflète non seulement une certaine inefficacité des organes représentatifs traditionnels (partis politiques, médias officiels et parlement) mais aussi une urgence relative

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pour transmettre leur message. Les principaux moyens technologiques de communication utilisés par le mouvement sont Facebook, YouTube, Twitter et les blogs. Les jeunes ont utilisé ces outils non seulement pour promouvoir le mouvement en soi, mais aussi pour faciliter son organisation opérationnelle en informant les décideurs, les militants et même les partisans dudit mouvement à l'échelle nationale. Le présent article évalue le degré auquel les plates-formes de médias sociaux utilisées par le mouvement du 20 février ont changé la donne dans le jeu politique pour une génération avide de liberté et de changement après des décennies d'oppression au Maroc.

Introduction

For decades, many generations of Moroccan political activists and ordinary citizens waged battles against authoritarian institutions in unfriendly national and international environments. Historically, Morocco had experienced large-scale political repression during the reign of King Hassan II. Until the early 1990s, a political conflict pitted the monarchy against political organizations of the left.

The cause of disagreement consisted in the different conceptions both parties had regarding the system of political governance. The first conception evokes the monarch of postcolonial Morocco, or an authoritarian leader controlling institutional reform and political participation. The second conception suggests the emergence of a state that responds to the needs of its citizens and, importantly, a monarch that rules citizens rather than governs subjects (Cohen and Jaidi 2006:2).¹

Every time these political rifts occurred, the regime deployed its repressive arsenal to stifle all spaces capable of generating contestation. Known in the official discourse as the 'years of lead', such a period embodied a long and dismal era in the history of Morocco. Over the course of this period, Moroccans revolted several times, namely in big cities like Casablanca, Marrakech or Fez demanding democracy, dignity, freedom and social justice.²

Detentions, disappearances and torture were routine during the mid-1960s through the 1970s and late 1980s. Many have paid for the struggle with their lives. At that time, the activists did not have the high-tech communicative tools like social networks³ and Internet that would have allowed them to coordinate their actions and clarify their choices. Hundreds of volunteers had to spend whole nights drafting fliers by hand for distribution the following morning.

If the political claims were the outcome of the struggles initiated by activists in the past, the merit of the February 20 (F20)⁴ protest movement was to bring those same demands back on to the political agenda.⁵ Activism

and political involvement in Morocco came to occupy centre stage in current debates. Briefly, both movements relate to Moroccan contemporary protest history. While the claims remained identical, every generation was seeking to exploit the resources available to them. Thus, it helped add a brick to a large political building project.

This time around, February 20 kicked off the social, economic and political agenda in 2011. The activists who took the initiative to ignite F20 in Morocco at the beginning of 2011 aspired to create a revolt similar to those in Tunisia and Egypt. Later on, uprisings broke in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria. These popular movements confirmed the emergence of a new protest wave stretching across entire political regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Such regimes essentially built their power on repression, cooptation, corruption and the absence of the rule of law.

The turmoil of 2011 was the product of a complex set of factors. Put simply, protests came to signal the bankruptcy of ideologies such as nationalism and socialism, which led to the erosion of state legitimacy in terms of an inclusive national and social project of development. Additionally, urbanization and globalization have not only inflated the size of popular expectations, but also underscored the failure of public policies to respond to them.

With the development of mass education and communication technologies, social maturation and political awareness took place. The youth voiced requirements for regaining a sense of social and national dignity through slogans expressed in a universal language: dignity, freedom, justice. It was a unanimous call against the humiliation felt under repressive authoritarian rule, arbitrariness, and lack of prospects for the young generations. Unlike in other Arab countries, the F20 protesters did not call for the fall of the regime, but rather focused on the end of absolutism, cronyism and corruption.

This article discusses the context of the emergence of F20, introduces the movement, considers its main components, presents its message, sheds light on its communicative strategy, analyses its merits, and, finally, explores its future role as a possible catalyst for change.

Presentation of the Movement

The Socio-economic and Political Context

The movement members were young and mostly unknown. They have arisen in the political arena in the aftermath of the demographic transition. They were mostly born in the 1980s/90s, and are among the 60 per cent of the Moroccan population who is under forty. They are the result of the demographic drop in the population growth rate and the decrease in the number of children

per household, with all the foregone qualitative consequences. Among these one can mention urbanization, rising educational standards, longer life expectancy, an ageing population, women's increased access to the workforce, rising divorce, declining marriage and growing bachelorhood rates.

They were the products of the social impact of the Structural Adjustment Program (1983–92) according to which harsh cuts affected vital public sectors like health and education.⁶ The families into which these young people were born suffered from the negative externalities of that programme. The latter induced a decrease in public investment, a severe rise in unemployment and poverty. Reversing the 1973 wave of 'Moroccanization', Structural adjustment included large-scale privatization of public services and signaled a significant withdrawal of the state from most economic activities.

Oddly, the Moroccan state had to implement structural reforms which 'challenge the authority and control [the state has] worked for decades to cultivate' (Cohen and Jaidi 2006:7). Ever since, Morocco has been 'trying hard to attract foreign investors to compensate for a shortage of domestic capital and to use international corporations as a gateway to foreign markets, notably Europe... the influx of foreign capital that was expected did not take place' (Layachi 1998:24).

The majority of the movement members grew within such an environment that shaped them. As the state became more remote, people bore the full brunt of the effects of globalization and Free Trade Agreements signed by Morocco with its main partners.⁷ This period also witnessed the rise of a new class of wealthy rentiers and 'businessmen'. The latter did not hesitate to exhibit indecently their wealth in a fundamentally poor Moroccan society with fewer employment opportunities at home and abroad. The intensity of frustration, notes Ted Robert Gurr, is the fuel of social movements (Gurr 1970).

The paradox between the skyrocketing costs of living and falling income, when available, drove scores of bitter young graduates into poverty, unemployment or the practice of a job that neither matched nor valued their university skills. Morocco's economic reform efforts have not materialized into concrete improvements in the living standards for all Moroccans.⁸ Unsurprisingly, there are gross income disparities across regions, between urban and rural populations, and between the urban rich and the further pauperized urban poor (El Aoufi and Bensaid 2005).

This dangerous concentration of desperately poor people in big cities explains the 1980s and 1990s street riots and the foregone massive repression. Similarly, the subsequent protest movements and mobilization in the small towns of Bouarfa, Sefrou, Tata, Sidi Ifni, Al-Hociema, and Zagora reflected an intense feeling of frustration due to their socio-economic marginalization.

Despite its demographic importance, the youth turned into adulthood in a locked political system. It lives with the feeling that the political regime neither hears nor considers them. Marginality and humiliation afflicting the young constitute important grounds for engagement in protests. The new rising educated non-elite youth expressed a sense of belonging to some sort of 'useless Morocco'.

They were the products of a politically sealed horizon.⁹ For instance, the turnout in the 2007 elections was historically low despite an extremely expensive 'modern' advertising campaign. The general perception was that these elections did not respond to the real concerns of the people.¹⁰ More than two-thirds shunned the elections, as they always felt rejected by the institutions and the public policies emanating from them. Amongst the institutions, public school no longer represents the 'social elevator' it used to be.

The only thing left for young people to dream about was either to 'emigrate' or indulge in some type of informal occupation. Populations of 'different socioeconomic backgrounds are no longer connected through the primary myths and policies of nationalism' (Cohen and Jaidi 2006: 125 – 6).¹¹ Economic liberalization has introduced 'new patterns of social marginality and [provided] space for new identity formation that rejects national identity and a national project of development' (Cohen and Jaidi 2006:43).

The wearing down of a national project of development undermined the legitimacy and authority of the state and led to the appearance of non-state actors on the socio-political scene. The logic of development, which favoured economic growth over social and human capital, only produced more exclusion and frustration. Actually, it is unthinkable to perceive of development in a society plagued with marginalization, poverty, corruption, impunity, lack of accountability, and subservience of the judiciary to the executive branch.

The belief that only economic growth would trigger an upgrading in social indicators paved the way for political support for any call to improve social conditions. Such a political voice for enhancing social conditions turned any control on political freedom into a public issue. For the young protesters, the Internet has been an instrumental catalyst using participatory media and social networks for political debates. With its modern, anonymous and horizontal nature, Facebook offered new forms of mass mobilization, which particularly affected this age range not prone to adopt the methods of past mobilization.

The Emergence of the Movement

In essence, F20 emerged from Facebook where it issued its initial statement for Moroccans 'to demonstrate peacefully' (Hammoudi 2012: 191–6). Its goal was to achieve large political reforms including a new constitution representing the 'real will of the people', and the dissolution of both the government and parliament with the formation of a transitional government. It originally consisted of three groups: 'Freedom and democracy now', 'People demand change', and 'For dignity, uprising is the solution'.

F20 managed to take to the street after the citizens gathered in the symbolic public squares previously defined through Facebook. During these rallies, the militants posted a collection of photos and videos immediately after they were taken. Thus, F20 reported not only its activities but also the flaws of the political regime, documented with both pictures and videos featuring information and follow-up issues of detention, torture and corruption. It used this strategy in order, on the one hand, to break the wall of fear among citizens who participated in the protest marches or were still reluctant to do so. On the other hand, by emerging from the virtual into the open public space, it confirmed itself as a political force to be reckoned with.

F20 carried out further discussions through Facebook over the weekend that followed its first demonstration. Following the baptism of fire, Facebook was then set to become a means for scheduling protests and disseminating the movement's video footage as well as a podium for the expression of its most urgent demands. Besides, it represented a platform for rich and heated discussions about the future steps to be undertaken and the best ways of achieving them. The strategic objective of the Facebook page (Ghonim 2012: 84) was to win support of Moroccan public opinion by: (i) convincing people to join the page and read posts; (ii) getting them to interact with the content by clicking the 'Like' button or leaving comments; (iii) leading them to implement their activism on the street.

F20 also sought to communicate with the youth¹² movements in the region in order to take advantage of their experience and acquire a regional dimension. Always padlocked by authoritarian practices, which pretend to speak on behalf of everyone, F20 devised a way to thwart censorship and challenge official narratives by co-producing dissident political content. Information was widely disseminated across the different branches (*tansiqiyyat*) of the movement on social networks. The activists themselves generated the content of these participatory patterns of information sharing.

However, no matter how critical, the potential offered by Facebook was not the exclusive cause of the protests. Rallies would be unthinkable

without the earlier political commitment of the F20 members. Nevertheless, although the use of Facebook certainly did not instigate protests, it shaped their organization. At an operational level, the actions of F20 focused primarily on a willingness to challenge authoritarianism. It planned neither to take power nor to promote a specific ideological or political agenda. The primacy of the demand for social justice contained in their slogans reflected this reality.

The occupations of symbolic public spaces country-wide were physical expressions of the popular dismay and disillusionment, which the F20 protest platforms conveyed. Such moves were essential ingredients for a real awakening and meaningful transformation of the political consciousness of the masses usually known for their passiveness and fatalism. Facebook was widely used by F20 as a carrier of new forms of organization of political commitment and participation. It laid the foundations for a much larger democratic expression. Facebook allowed the relocation into the virtual space of local events initiated by F20, especially those with a strong symbolic reach: the narratives of arrests and police repression.

The swift and massive propagation of information contributed not only to the building of indignation and convergence of opinions on social networks (the formation of consensus), but also triggered the potential for mobilization leading to the initiation of contestation (mobilization for action). Liberated through social networks, the voice of the movement became more audible. Hesitant critics no longer expressed their views exclusively in the private sphere. Nothing could be worse for the image of the regime abroad than public critical contestation.

F20 seemed to have learned more from Facebook about their ability to influence home politics than during decades of schooling. The movement's initiatives changed, at least initially, the dynamics of power between the regime and F20 in a truly unpredictable manner for the former. Fear switched sides. Through the depths of their despair, the youth of F20 offered the whole nation a lesson in hope, citizenship and political maturity heralding a process of transformation that has only just begun. They demonstrated that there were 'soft' ways and means to undermine authoritarianism.

Social platforms such as Facebook contributed greatly to the protest ethos of F20. Virtual networks may have transformed the nature of political and social confrontations. They helped F20 address the fundamental dynamics of change and power in a different way, all the more so because its structure offered a liberating potential for the political currents that compose it.

The Components of F20

The F20 movement¹³ was a new form of protest. It was not a labour, political, religious, cultural or reformist movement. It did not operate with the logic of a labour union because unions belong to a limited part of the citizenry, and represent sectarian demands. It imposed no entry barriers and unambiguously asserted its goal to change a corrupt and authoritarian regime.

F20 did not function like a political party. The masses in a party are limited to party members, sympathizers with its political line, or to the people who accept its leaders. The goal of the party is to win elections, access political power, and implement a particular political agenda. Eventually, the focus of the whole struggle is on a process where the party is itself nothing but a tool used to serve the broader interests of people. However, partisan logic has it that each party inevitably uses this struggle framework for the purposes of narrow partisanship.

F20 had room for neither party sectarianism nor leadership battles. Actually, non-partisan participants in the movement were averse to all sectarian partisanship and competition between parties. For non-partisan militants, they came to support the goal of overthrowing corruption and authoritarianism, not to shore up a particular party.

As a unique mass struggle movement, F20 gave a voice to the people without one.¹⁴ Thousands of Moroccans broke the silence. They took to the streets to demand freedom, dignity and democracy. Until the recent past, people did not even dare speak about, let alone criticize, the monarchy. People were finally out and stopped saying that everything was fine. They were re-wired not to fear the regime. With unmatched political demands, F20 defined itself as an active political movement leading popular unrest.

The parties that composed F20, albeit to a modest extent, were the Moroccan radical left-wing parties such as the United Socialist Party, the Federal Congress Party, the 'Democratic Way', the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, the Amazigh Democracy Movement and the 'Vanguard Party' (*Hizb at-tali3a*), as well as other groups and small streams with a revolutionary orientation.

Additionally, the Justice and Charity Association (JCA) (*jama'at al-'adl wa-l-ihsan*)¹⁵ Islamic movement participated in F20 and bore an important part of the logistical burden.¹⁶ Actually, F20 derived its popular and organizational skills from the JCA without endorsing its ideological backdrop, while it adopted the radical left's communicative tone. Unsurprisingly, the most active militants in F20 belonged to the forces of the revolutionary left. Alongside the JCA, the parties of the left were therefore the basic political

components of F20, notwithstanding the singular ideological split of its members. They all aspired to achieve societal, democratic and revolutionary changes in tune with their publicly declared goals. The organizational make-up of F20 translated into its protest messages.

The Message of the Movement

F20 threw a big stone into the Moroccan political 'swamp'. While not totally novel in their nature, the claims expressed by the movement were an unprecedented blend of social, economic and political demands. These can be summed up as follows:

- a democratic constitution to be drafted by an elected constituent assembly reflecting the genuine will of the people;
- dissolution of both the government and parliament and the formation of an interim transitional government subject to the will of the people;
- independence and impartiality of the judiciary;
- the trial of those involved in corruption cases, abuse of power, and looting of the country's resources;
- recognition of *Tamazight* as an official language alongside Arabic and consideration of the specificities of the Moroccan identity in language, culture and history;
- release of all political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and prosecution of those responsible for their detention;
- immediate and comprehensive integration of the unemployed in the civil service through fair and transparent competitions;
- ensuring a dignified life by reducing the costs of living and increasing the minimum wage;
- enabling all citizens to access social services and improving their cost-effectiveness.

F20's political slogan embodied these claims: 'Parliamentary Monarchy'. Its ceiling of demands amounted to a political transition from an executive to a parliamentary monarchy where the king reigns and not governs, thereby giving all power and sovereignty to the people. The movement highlighted the big divide between mainstream electoral politics and the main street. Often accused of suffering from political lethargy, the movement proved that the young were able to respond to all the forces calling for reforms.¹⁷ F20's credo was: Moroccan youth are politicized, but have refused to take part in a 'corrupt political system'.

Weekly protests in the public street were the form the movement gave to that political message. F20 considered it was a legitimate right for the Moroccan youth to demand reforms that would ensure democratic transition, which turned over the years into a slogan bereft of any tangible political content. It conveyed the message that young people had the right to express their aspirations in outright defiance of any form of tutelage. Indeed, 'Contemporary protest societies ... are characterized not only ... by the proliferation of itemized protest against virtually any political decision but also by a confusing complementarity between bottom-up campaigns for radical change emerging from new radical action networks and top-down campaigns for radical change emerging from governments' (Blühdorn 2007: 3).¹⁸ Throughout its different protest campaigns, the trilogy of 'freedom', 'dignity' and 'social justice' was F20's defining message. It developed communication strategies and implemented tactics to improve forms of protest in an attempt to remain close to its base and consistent with its initial founding Facebook manifesto.

Communication Strategy

The slogans of F20 faithfully translated its public communicative strategy.¹⁹ Islamist lexicology was totally absent from its slogans. The latter positioned themselves midway between the legacy of previous struggles and the formulation of a new phraseology signaling the peculiarity of F20. Gradually, the movement's coordinators created slogan committees that worked to develop, homogenize, and organize effective new slogans during public appearances.

F20 was particularly cautious in preventing spillover effects between oral protest slogans and slogans directly attacking the sacred figure of the king. In this regard, F20 never adopted the famous expression 'Down with the regime' that flourished elsewhere in the Arab revolts. This slogan was often replaced by less radical formulations such as 'Down with despotism', or 'Down with corruption'. The conveyance of protest slogans by F20 echoed popular melodies that were part of the emotional register of Moroccans. F20 skillfully dosed the emotional fiber to arouse and optimize the sympathy of public opinion, thereby making violent police repression even more shocking.

In essence, F20 undertook a peaceful and professional communication strategy. It was imbued with a touch of Moroccan creativity. The movement immediately conducted communication in classical Arabic, but not only. It drafted news items and slogans in Standard Arabic. However, their eagerness to target a larger audience also compelled them to use both colloquial Arabic and French. Often, the militants drafted banners in two languages²⁰ as

if the messages were also destined for external consumption. The *Amazigh* alphabet (*Tifinagh*) was present in the communication strategy of F20, though was not particularly visible especially in big cities.

Remarkably, 'Arench', a mixture of Arabic and French, emerged on banners as well. This 'language' frequently used by private radio and the Moroccan street not only created 'bilingual illiterates', but also translated a certain pride towards national languages. The same linguistic register used in folk art, like Moroccan rap, was utilized in view of its growing popularity and appeal among the younger generations.

The same 'linguistic cocktail' appeared on social sites such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and blogs.²¹ Arab Spring lingo thus turned protests into a mobile political culture travelling at a blinding speed and bringing with it groundbreaking slogans demanding immediate change. Forsaking their wall of silence and collective fears, young people found on the social networks spaces for dialogue that 'politics as usual'²² was unable to provide. Fear of politics ingrained in their minds, the debate distorted by self-censorship and political waffle suddenly gave way to individual freedom that eventually generated a vibrant public space. Enthralled by dynamics created by the collective migration onto the virtual platforms, F20 had the merit of emerging into the public space whenever the opportunities arose.

The Merits of the Movement

Born in the context of the Arab spring, F20 acquired legitimacy nationally and regionally. F20 managed to build a two-fold protest ethos. The first was based on economic and social demands drawn from the daily lives of Moroccans such as the high costs of living, unemployment, corruption, health and educational crises.²³ It also sought to focus on the call to revisit the major political orientations of society and challenged the dominant traditional model of power. It stirred a rather stagnant Moroccan political life.

Within months, the movement's protests yielded a swift reaction from the establishment that nobody could have predicted. F20 compelled the regime to change its political agenda²⁴ to declare a constitutional amendment and a package of reforms, which, at least in the short or medium term, were unthinkable. A couple of weeks after the first protests, King Mohammed VI gave a speech on 9 March 2011 where he launched the long awaited project of constitutional reform.²⁵

F20 created a new alignment between the political components of society and its intellectual elite,²⁶ regarding which positions to adopt in support of or in opposition to the popular protests. On the media front, the

movement recommended a real liberalization of the public media landscape. Its objective was to create a space for democratic debate and put an end to the manipulation, dumbing down and monopolization of public opinion carried out by the official media.

It confirmed that the current institutions were too flawed to count on any reform from within.²⁷ It pointed out that elections were illegitimate at the level of participation, mechanisms and results; elections only yielded sham institutions directly following the regime's instructions. Consequently, people massively abstained from political participation, as was shown in the September 2007 low participation rates (NDI 2007: 2; NDI February 2008).

F20 gave legitimacy to peaceful popular protests, snatched the right to demonstrate in the street, and showed great political maturity for maintaining peaceful demonstrations. It ushered in an unprecedented public debate focusing on political taboos such as the king's sanctity, power, wealth, corruption, allegiance and accountability.

F20 responded with the same weapons as the regime that was hit by a profound de-legitimization. In the movement's slogans, the regime's legitimacy was no longer linked to the struggle for independence or economic reforms but to terminating the era of impunity and privileges. This bottom-up shift in the reallocation of legitimacy signaled the obsolescence of old methods of governance and the inauguration of a new era that would give predominance to the people.

The Future of the Movement

Each social movement is the product of its context. F20 turned its marginality into a combat resource. It chose new forms of struggle inspired by the idea that was the cornerstone of the issuance of the first Facebook call for demonstrations in February 2011. The movement shifted from the virtual into the physical space in order to put pressure on an authoritarian regime.

Born after the fall of the Berlin Wall, movement militants found themselves amidst a fast, free and mobile virtual community. Open and faithful to the dynamic of the exchange of ideas, some of them took part in F20. They expressed their hope to live in a political setting different from those experienced by previous generations of Moroccans.

Three years later, the time of the ardour of protests gave way to a period of analysis and reflection. F20 was no longer in a position to carry on its intensive political street rallies. They reached their peak in 2011. Yet, F20 should not be cheerfully dismissed for that matter. Certainly, the constitutional amendment, among other exogenous factors, significantly

weakened but did not totally wipe out F20's core message. Their 'leaderless' structure of protest proved less of a managerial burden but eventually exposed the movement to political retrieval and repression.²⁸ Intrinsically, the lack or absence of political skills of many rally leaders nationwide also took its toll on F20.

F20, which began spontaneously and without political umbrellas, mutated into a stage for uncompromising discourses, presenting themselves as revolutionary agents seeking radical change. Given these breakdowns, it became the target of attacks from traditional mainstream parties, which sided with the regime. In spite of these severe blows, the movement did not completely withdraw from the political field. The core claims upon which F20 had founded its struggle ethos are still looming. For a movement that lasted barely over a year, activists from its different branches submitted their experience for criticism, examination and analysis. Considering F20's militant line, five main phases could be distinguished.

The first was the stage of the monthly marches dominated by their political nature under the banner of 'parliamentary monarchy' before it was offset by the popular slogan of 'democratic constitution' in the hope of drawing the largest number of militants to the marches.

The second phase ushered in the transition from political to social slogans. They were formulated in a simple language that common people could both understand and respond to. F20 organized weekly marches in popular neighbourhoods. These marches aimed at broadening the base of participants. They sought to secure the contribution of a 'critical mass' with the hope of granting F20 a popular character. However, the participation of the masses remained symbolic. Decades of repression meant that any call for rallies against authoritarianism received a mild welcome.

The third part was 'defensive'. The activists tried to isolate and play down the series of institutional reforms laid down in the king's 9 March 2011 discourse. The aim of the activists was to discredit, de-legitimize and eventually shun the official plan for reforms. Nevertheless, as F20 militants started to lose steam, they realized that their mission was to supervise protests rather than demonstrate on behalf of the people.

The fourth period followed the completion of the ratification of the July 2011 constitutional referendum. Predictably, the movement acted as if nothing significant occurred and continued to re-iterate the same demands mentioned in the initial phase mentioned above. In the aftermath of the November 2011 elections, a new government emerged. A large segment of the population expressed the hope that the Islamic-led coalition government would improve their living conditions. F20 experienced the withdrawal of part of its main

supporters. In this context, the claims of toppling a newly elected government emerging from the leading opposition and taking office for the first time appeared all the more uncanny as it was regarded as promising by many.

Finally, the fifth stage, where F20 needs to show special political edge in order to cope with the new sobering realities. No matter how convenient it appears, the idea of focusing the attacks exclusively on the government, led by the PJD (Justice and Development Party), may ultimately serve the opponents of democracy more than benefit F20 itself. Additionally, in its eagerness to accommodate the monarchy, each time the current government comes under heavy fire from its political opponents, it systematically blames them for seeking to jeopardize the fragile national political unity and stability. Having regularly experienced such assaults itself, F20 could not afford to lose more ground keeping in mind the ongoing crackdown campaigns from which its members still suffer.

Until there is evidence to the contrary, the best option for F20 seems unlikely to be the easiest. Self-reflection is as mandatory as a profound change in political strategy is unavoidable. Mobilizing and planning to change a composite society one does not thoroughly understand surely leads to political suicide. Furthermore, such understanding does not happen overnight. Unmistakably, it makes sense to reprimand a movement of just about a year-old for what it has failed to accomplish. However, perhaps it makes more sense to point out that F20 significantly contributed to reconcile Moroccan youth with politics, unleash a level of political debate, and raise the ceiling of political demands and awareness. It represented a weapon of mass denunciation expressed in an unusual language of protest. The movement was mainly driven by the disillusionment with 'politics as usual' driven by the cosmetic concessions of the regime and echoed by traditional parties.

Currently, the political debate across television screens that transmit the parliament sessions is, by many accounts, unable to provide an appetizing recipe even several years after the peaceful rallies of F20 and the 2011 constitution, which granted unprecedented powers to the president of the government. In parliament, the opposition says the government failed, while the government responds that it has accomplished many things for Moroccans despite its suffering from 'pockets of resistance'. In his recent televised mid-term address before MPs, the president of the government could not specify the nature of the social and political reforms he had achieved. Meanwhile, the growing problems Moroccans experience on a daily basis do not make his case any stronger.

Far from the spirit of democratic accountability and control, most parliamentary debates amount to firing sound bombs that create moments of short-lived political shows. Every politician in Morocco today pays lip service

to the idea that their party sides with the ‘concerns of the street’ and with the ‘interests of Moroccans’, while no one knows the truth about the positioning of the Moroccan street. If it is easy to credit it all to F20, it seems hard to deny the movement some political dividend in the near future.

Maybe one should not underestimate its ability to regroup and morph into a political structure, provided it corrects its course of struggle and liberates itself from the ideological remoteness that drove away its hub supporters. The movement is called upon to express the concerns emanating from the street, which have now acquired both the momentum and courage to cry out in the face of injustice. Such a call implies revisiting the country’s time-honoured democratic transition that began with the socialist government of the first political alternation in 1998, but has been at a standstill since then.²⁹

Conclusion

At this stage of the research, it is difficult to provide a thorough and appropriate assessment of a movement over the course of such a short but eventful period. As inspiring as they are unsettling, protest movements such as F20 do not operate in a vacuum. The regional context played a significant role in igniting the protests in Morocco. There is no denying that communications technologies challenged the power of regimes to rein in protests within a local framework.

Nevertheless, in itself, the availability of social media is neither necessary nor sufficient to incentivize collective action in undemocratic societies. It would be premature to overstate the virtues of social networks by presenting them as the main cause of the protest ethos of F20. Nevertheless, it would be equally inaccurate to deny their role as powerful information instruments, which served as engines of protest and mobilization. F20 was able to use such communicative power to put pressure on the regime with the aim of producing fundamental political changes.

The utilization by the movement of these social networks as a rare space of freedom, where everyone could learn and communicate, eventually proved effective. Through Facebook, for instance, the youth realized that they not only shared similar views but that they were also not alone in their ordeal and struggle. They tilted the balance in their favour by making public a series of scandals and abuses that were embarrassing for the regime. Through an increased de-legitimization of the regime, they highlighted the lack of separation of the three branches of power, rampant corruption, cronyism and the existence of an ageing political class disconnected from the realities. Economically and socially, F20 conveyed the impoverishment of the middle class, a deficit in social justice, and growing unemployment for a predominantly young population.

The movement capitalized on these networks to convince as many people as possible to move from the Internet to the streets. In this regard, Facebook was the means of gathering the youth of F20 around a common cause. Undoubtedly, with social networking, the dynamics of protest movements significantly mutated. These networks liberated public discourse and made audible divergent overtones in a political setting riddled with thought orthodoxy.

This article has attempted to elucidate the emergent background of F20, describe the movement, understand its message, spell out its communicative strategy, evaluate its merits, and, finally, investigate its future role as a possible catalyst for change.

For the sake of an accurate understanding, it is important to put F20 into a global historical context. After decades of political repression, Morocco undertook political and economic reforms most of which were imposed by international financial and human rights institutions. However, these reforms proved too costly for the Moroccan state to sustain. On the social front, such economic policies marginalized large segments of the population. By equating market integration with development, these reforms were hailed as a solution to poverty.

Hampered by inadequate economic resources and pressured by creditor states, Morocco moved towards more state retreat from the provision of basic public services. The consequence was the exacerbation of social inequalities in terms of income distribution and access of Moroccans reliant upon public support. Prioritizing economic growth over social development only generated more unemployment, poverty and exclusion, thereby challenging the capacity of a national development project to include all communities. Such a political tone for improving social conditions invited political freedom into the public debate, namely with the explosion of social networks.

Emulating the Arab Spring, non-state actors such as F20 made urgent social, economic and political demands, which the regime translated into a new constitution. Early elections took place, an Islamist-led coalition government from the opposition took office, some political prisoners were freed and the populace began to foster new hope. Although F20 continued to ignore these events, it could barely deny it lost its core supporters. The political ambition of F20 was conceivably bigger than its capacity to mobilize for its cause.

Consequently, many have already considered F20 past history. But unless one undervalues F20's socio-political outcome, its message has lost nothing of its original appeal. It communicated the regression of values of domination

by the vibrant youth, connected the dots between the rising new media and a much broader process of democratization. The movement challenged an unsubstantiated notion according to which traditional elites confined youth more to an age cohort than to a category of political participation. It confirmed that there is an urgent need to rethink views on youth.

In the aftermath of its perceptible decline, F20's popular demand for change has remained unanswered. Key socio-political transformations bring about both hope and fear. Wary of the sweeping change the F20 movement proposed, Moroccans saw in the PJD the most credible political alternative to respond to their claims. At mid-term, however, the PJD lost much of the political 'virginity' and credibility it once enjoyed. The PJD appeared as the ultimate firewall of the regime. It has come to be organically identified with it and thus alienated many of its grassroots' followers. Ironically, the ability of any political entity, beyond F20, to mobilize Moroccans around a common cause rebounds.

In the meantime, the remaining F20 members also took a dose of their own medicine by gathering in Rabat to weigh up the itinerary of their movement. As mentioned earlier, five stages were distinguished from F20's first Facebook call for demonstrations to its present status. The movement watered down the idealism and hubris of its early protests. It concluded that losing a battle did not amount to losing a war against authoritarian rule. The rallies revealed the frailty of authoritarianism before the unexpected power of the street. It breathed life into a dream of Moroccan youth demanding change.

Arguably, the movement lacked effectiveness as it relied more on boycott than it did on participation from within the existing institutions against which it built its protest ethos. Yet, its ideas would keep constant pressure on the regime against any temptation to roll back into past practices that hitherto managed to extend the status quo. It underlined the regime's strategy of maintaining absolutist rule with minor changes instead of engaging in extensive political reforms. The regime fears these reforms might inexorably jeopardize its power. Predictably, F20 dismissed the king's carefully calibrated top-down reforms as window-dressing calling them 'façade democracy', doing too little too late.

There are already foreboding signs that demands for change will only become more compelling. The wave of social protests is far from being in the rear view mirror. As anyone who has been centrally involved in crisis situations will tell you, battlefield medicine is never perfect. There are no easy quick fixes to the speed, virulence and magnitude with which the current social, economic and political problems are spreading. The

core expectations that Moroccans had for the country following colonial independence remain, to date, fundamentally unaddressed. Therefore, a genuine political paradigm shift seems as necessary as it is inevitable. Perhaps the time has come for Morocco to confirm that is not the only country to believe in its exception.

Notes

1. In Morocco, Daadaoui argues, 'the dual nature of the state developed through the various stages of state formation is reinforced by a process of ritualization of political discourse. This means that political authority and power in Morocco are subject to a constant influx of sociocultural symbols that garner great societal significance. The ritualization of the political discourse serves to pacify and weaken oppositional forces in Morocco, while empowering the monarch as the epitome of the nation to rule unchecked' (Daadaoui 2011:73).
2. Back in 1856 Alexis de Tocqueville already wrote that 'despotism, far from struggling against this tendency (the confinement in a narrow individualism where all public virtue is stifled), makes it irresistible, because it strips citizens of any common passion, mutual need to communicate, opportunity to interact together; [despotism] walls them up, so to speak, in private life' [author's translation].
3. The concept of 'social network' means a set of individuals, associations or organizations that meet with a common goal of acting together for a cause. In sociology, this notion is used to examine the relationships within a group and understand the way it operates. In the 1990s, the concept also referred to the social networks on the Internet where individuals can express themselves and build 'virtual relationships' with other users.
4. For convenience purposes, I refer to the February 20 movement as F20.
5. 'Ruling elites from Morocco to Bahrain have learned to contain popular demands, reassert control over restive societies, and recalibrate ruling formulas to limit the revolutionary potential of protest movements' (Heydemann 2013:61).
6. The primary purpose of structural adjustment was 'to bring about economic growth through a market economy that encourages private investment, diminishes state economic involvement, liberalizes commerce, entices foreign investment, and promotes exports' (Layachi 1998:21).
7. Politics alone does not explain these revolts. Indeed, globalization and free trade have not kept their promises. Stiglitz made clear that the West told underdeveloped countries that the new economic system would provide them with unprecedented wealth. It brought unprecedented poverty instead. Economic globalization has deepened the rift between North and South and between the wealthy classes and the deprived in the countries of the South. Strengthening dependence, structural unemployment and the dominance of the rentier economy are the visible consequences. The Arab world, with its oil revenues provided to states, is being hit hard by these repercussions (Stiglitz 2002: 3–8).

8. It would be interesting to explore two basic aspects of the ‘upgraded’ authoritarian conception of change. The first relates to the role of authoritarianism in determining the forms taken by the changes during the paradigm shift from a locked political system to the discourse of the ‘promotion’ of democracy. The second is the relationship between the processes of democratization and economic reforms. According to Steven Heydemann, this process of adaptation and change among Arab regimes signals ‘the emergence of new patterns of authoritarian governance that have reduced the vulnerability of Arab governments to pressures for political and economic reform, and equipped them to capture and exploit the gains from economic openness and technological innovation. These trends also make Arab regimes able to mitigate at least some of the social and political pressures associated with the sense of stagnation, vulnerability, and insularity that have long been evident in Arab perceptions of their own circumstances. Upgrading has been effective in part because it has delivered visible, meaningful benefits to Arab societies, even as it reinforces existing regimes. Not least, it has provided the framework through which Arab leaderships have extended and reinforced the social coalitions upon which their regimes depend’ (Heydemann 2007: 27).
9. No social movement can emerge if it does not have a minimum of political opportunities. The study of the environment is an issue that is structuring the activity of the protesters. Sidney Tarrow defines the concept of political opportunities as based on five factors: i) the degree of closure or opening of the political system; ii) stability or instability of political alignments; iii) the presence or absence of allies and support groups; iv) the division of the elite or their tolerance for protest; v) the government’s ability to initiate policy (cited in Fillieule 1993: 48).
10. ‘For some years now, it has been apparent that a great many of the new regimes are not themselves democratic, or any longer “in transition” to democracy. Some of the countries that fall into the “political gray zone ... between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship” are in fact electoral democracies, however “feckless” and poorly functioning, but many fall below the threshold of electoral democracy and are likely to remain there for a very long time.’ (Diamond 2002: 23)
11. Actually, a whole body of literature on economic liberalization under authoritarian regimes suggests that the latter is not conducive to democratization: ‘Many saw the liberalization taking place in MENA countries as essentially a façade whereby authoritarian elites conceded the bare minimum necessary to appease critics. Though some maintained that elites might not be able to control the openings that they created, as time wore on, it appeared that the authoritarian regimes that liberalized were becoming *more* stable, not less. The adoption of liberal institutions, it has been argued, was part of a process of “authoritarian upgrading” where regimes responded to social and economic pressures by changing their modalities of control.’ (Ahmed and Capoccia 2014: 6)
12. The concept of youth is complex as it is neither static nor homogeneous. The centrality of the concept refers less to the inherent characteristics linked to their category (those aged 15–25) than to the construction of youth through

- socialization institutions such as family, school and job market: 'it is not the relations between ages that create change or stability in society, but change in society which explains relations between different ages' (Allen 1968: 321).
13. Though we are using here the concept of 'movement' in its loose sense, we should distinguish it from other social modes of expression. The concept of 'riot' is defined as the negation of the concept of social movement. It means a collection of violent collective ephemeral, unorganized action, with neither leadership nor accurate social demands. This is the opposite of a social movement. If the social movement (labour unions) is devoted to the defence of specific material interests, the concept of popular movement described here refers to a movement where the core issues are still about bread and butter issues, particularly access to resources. In many cases, the actors involved are the underprivileged, the marginalized, workers and poor farmers. These popular movements carry the hope that democratic structures will remove oppression, allow participation and hence overcome many of the socio-economic inequalities.
 14. Alain Touraine specifies that 'the concept of social movement is only useful if it serves to highlight the existence of a particular type of collective action, through which a specific social category challenges a form of social domination, both general and particular, and calls against it to values in the general direction of the society it shares with its opponent in order to deprive the latter of legitimacy' (1997: 118) [author's translation].
 15. From now on, for convenience purposes, I refer to *jama'at al-'adl wa-l-ihsan* (Justice and Charity Association) as the JCA.
 16. The JCA withdrew on 18 November 2011, although none of the objectives of F20 had yet been achieved. Such a move showed that the JCA movement took part in F20 insofar as the latter served its political agenda.
 17. Decades of political and economic reforms left the powers of the monarchy intact. As Lise Storm points out, there are 'no guarantees to the outcome of any political reform process, nothing is certain. However, it seems more than probable that if Morocco begins with a reform of the party system, then a reform of the political system will follow. On the other hand, if the reforms sought were introduced in the reverse order, it is doubtful whether reforms to the party system would be carried out as the pressure on the parties to adopt and implement such reforms would have almost vanished with the King losing his political powers. Moreover, as the King is strongly against substantial reforms to the political system and the population has not been mobilized behind this campaign, it seems unlikely that such reforms are going to take place in the near future' (Storm 2007: 172).
 18. This radical change represents a significant transformation of protest politics: the mobilization of a disempowered and excluded minority against the traditional centres of power.
 19. The content of protest slogans itself is the subject of tough negotiations between competing ideological trends and leaderships. The wording of protest slogans is not an opportunity for the emergence of new leaders, as much as it confirms and reinforces political pluralism inside F20:

20. *Ya makhzan ya jabaan sha3b al maghrib laa yubaan* (Oh makhzen Oh coward Moroccans are not to be humiliated); *ya 3aalam shu:fshu:f al maghrib mahku:m bi al khawf* (Oh World Look look Morocco is ruled by fear); *jamaahir tu :ri tu :ri 3la annidaam addiktatu :ri* (Oh people revolt revolt against the dictatorial regime); *wakhhka ta3ya ma Tfi gha tsh3al 3atsh3al* (However hard you try to put the fire out, you won't succeed); *hiyya naar al jamaahir naar qwiyya gha tsh3al* (Tis People's fire, a strong fire that would form a flame); *al huku :ma msha :t uw jaat uw al Haala hiyya hiyya* (Government comes and goes but our conditions are always the same); *3ayyituna bi ashshi:3a:ra:t uw Hna huma addaHiyya* (You've worn us out with slogans and we're always the victim); *al hukuma barra barra* (Government Out); *al barlaman barra barra* (Parliament Out); *ya maghribi ya maghribiyya* (Oh Moroccan males and females); *al jihawiyya 3lik uw 3liyya masraHiyya* (Regionalism is but a head game on you and me); *ha :dibi ira :dat al jamahir la : budda min attaghyi :r* (Tis the will of the People change is inevitable); *ashsha3b yuri :du isqaata al fassa :d* (The People want to down corruption).
21. 'The Moroccan linguistic market ... is marked by the diversity of languages. Linguistic varieties present are prioritized so that the speakers, guided by their linguistic habitus (see Bourdieu 1982), aspire to the mastery of socially valued language products. There is then a strong competition between languages, namely Tamazight (Berber), standard, colloquial Arabic and foreign languages including French, Spanish and even more nowadays with English. The conflicts between these languages are sometimes latent and sometimes overt, according to the power positions implied by the social uses of these languages through the social practice of speaking subjects. The linguistic market is thus the setting for the symbolic violence that takes place within the context of diglossic or even polyglossic linguistic relationships between the languages in competition. These relationships are in constant entropy in the social field and are underpinned by issues related to the ownership of symbolic capital.' (Boukous 2005:86) [author's translation]
22. 'A form of protest that is becoming increasingly widespread is blogging. The number of bloggers is high and growing in most Arab countries. Governments fear them and try to control the internet. Blogging is related to some extent to the youth movement as bloggers tend to be young and youth movements use blogs as a form of communication. Bloggers are effective in disseminating information, spreading the word when protests are being planned, and circulating audio-visual materials documenting the excesses of governments and their security services.' (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011:12)
23. 'People have become sceptical of the ability of traditional political parties to make any difference in their daily lives. In fact, Moroccan political parties are 'conservative in the face of a society yearning for change, and have lost much of their power to mobilize and articulate societal interests' (Layachi 1998:39).
24. '[M]iddle [class] and upper [class] families, who are dissatisfied with the public educational system, enrol their children in private schools or in the French "mission" to guarantee them good mastery of the French language and better job prospects' (Boum 2008:214).

25. The decision of authoritarian rulers to comply with the new rules of the democratic game produces political incoherence for the former. In fact, 'the coexistence of democratic rules and autocratic methods aimed at keeping incumbents in power creates an inherent source of instability. The presence of elections, legislatures, courts, and an independent media creates periodic opportunities for challenges by opposition forces. Such challenges create a serious dilemma for autocratic incumbents. On the one hand, repressing them is costly, largely because the challenges tend to be both formally legal and widely perceived (domestically and internationally) as legitimate. On the other hand, incumbents could lose power if they let democratic challenges run their course. Periods of serious democratic contestation thus bring out the contradictions inherent in competitive authoritarianism, forcing autocratic incumbents to choose between egregiously violating democratic rules, at the cost of international isolation and domestic conflict, and allowing the challenge to proceed, at the cost of possible defeat' (Levitsky and Lucan 2002:59).
26. While the president of the government and parliament were somewhat enhanced under the new constitution, preponderant executive authorities remained in the hands of the king. For example, the king:
- continues to appoint the prime minister, although he is now required to choose a member of the party with the highest proportion of the vote in legislative elections (art. 47);
 - continues to appoint government ministers, although he is supposed to do so based on a proposal by the prime minister (art. 47);
 - retains the authority to fire government ministers (art. 47);
 - continues to preside over cabinet meetings and retains the authority to convene such meetings (art. 48);
 - retains the ability to dissolve parliament (art. 51);
 - remains commander-in-chief of the armed forces (art. 53);
 - continues to accredit all ambassadors and to sign and ratify treaties (with certain exceptions that require parliamentary approval) (art. 55);
 - continues to exercise his powers via decree (art. 42); and
 - remains the country's supreme Islamic religious authority as 'Commander of the Faithful' (art. 41).
27. Parties and the political elite, according to Rémy Leveau, allowed the central authority to use tribal structures to control the countryside. The traditional system works well inside the modern one. True legitimacy goes to those who are able to accumulate historical and traditional attributes, more than just modern ones (Leveau 1985:236). However, a rising educated, urban middle class has gradually become an important actor in the social system, increasingly replacing rural support for the monarchy.
28. In this regard, the experience of political alternation in 1998 had been disappointing for Moroccans dreaming of a better future. And even the Prime Minister of the time, Abderrahmane Youssoufi, who 'had been willing to work within the system, felt greatly deceived when that same system failed to deliver

- on its promise of openness' (Layachi 1998: 86). It is a fact of Moroccan political life that the Moroccan monarchy has always ensured full control of the electoral rules (i.e. division into constituencies) to prevent any possible landslide victory of a given party, which would allow it alone to have a majority in parliament.
29. Driven by a kind of 'political purity', F20 refused from the outset to enter openly into the political game; this was one of the major vulnerabilities of the movement. Admittedly, frustration and resentment were conveyed by the heterogeneous hotchpotch, which forms F20. Nevertheless, the lack of stable, coherent and strong leadership made it permeable to any tactical infiltration, which complicated its approach towards a possible reconfiguration of power relationships. The utilization of social networks is then a double-edged sword for F20 militants since the use of these services increases their exposure. The supervision of social networks by the authorities depends on the nature and level of the threat. Clearly, a complete block of social networks is inadequate when the potential threat comes from small groups. In the struggle between the security services and the movement, the authorities did not cut Internet connections. Instead, it seemed likely that they adopted a different strategy, which consisted of infiltrating these networks and screening their communications. It would be interesting to examine more closely this aspect of the relationship between the regime's attitude and the movement.
 30. The emergence of F20 in 2011 underlines the limitations of the reform momentum undertaken by the regime since the early 1990s. If these reforms were able to smooth out the explosive potential of previous political claims, they have not really responded to the issues raised a decade later by F20 (Hibou 2011: 3). Hence, there is no straight line moving from authoritarian rule into resolutely democratic progress. Domestic politics remains subject to the ruler's disposition, which would entail either backpedalling or gradual withdrawal of any announced in-depth reform 'one where progress is followed by retrogression, that is, reversal or partial reversal

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