



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Moroccan youth protest for constitutional reform, 2011

- Arab Awakening (2011)

February

2011

to: August

2012

Country: Morocco

Location City/State/Province: *Nationwide; based in Rabat, the capital*

Goals:

For constitutional reform, labor rights, education reform, healthcare reform. Against electoral fraud, political censorship, police brutality, corruption, high unemployment, high utility costs, and lack of language recognition (Berber, such as the Tamazight dialect).

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Press Conference on movement's claims
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 011. Records, radio, and television › Internet Campaign
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 025. Displays of portraits
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 044. Mock funerals

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 124. Boycott of elections

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- youth activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

February 20 Movement for Change

Partners:

The banned Islamist party Justice and Charity (al-Adl wa al-Ihsana), pro-reform Baraka (Enough), various opposition groups and parties, Berger nationalists

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Prince Moulay Hicham, a cousin of King Mohammed VI, voiced support of the initial February 20th protest

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Baraka
- Berger nationalists
- February 20 Movement
- Justice and Charity party
- anti-regime oppositional groups

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Berger nationalists (Exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Justice and Charity Party (Exit)

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

New constitution implemented in August satisfied many of the movement's supporters. Thus, the movement drew less public support in addition to the exit of multiple organizations.

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

King Mohammad VI, the governing Independence Party

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Spontaneous violence during protests such as: throwing stones at police. Protesters also torched cars, but the GNAD does not usually define property destruction as "violence" (see "About" button on home page).

Repressive Violence:

Police brutality

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although the movement did achieve constitutional reform and lessened the authority of the monarch, while imbuing the parliament with considerably more authority, the leaders of the movement did not believe it was significant enough reform, and shifted their goals towards even deposing the King. The popular masses would see success in constitutional reform, but this political success would not satisfy the economic demands of Moroccans en masse.

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. Political reforms in the 1990s expanded parliamentary power in 1992 and 1996, and in 1996 a bicameral legislature consisting of two chambers was established. On his accession to the throne in 1999, King Mohammed VI promised to enact a series of reforms democratizing the monarchy, but this was seen as largely unfulfilled. King Mohammad VI succeeded his father, King Hassan, who had ruled for thirty-seven years. Hassan's rule, known as the "Years of Lead," was largely marked by violence against state dissidents. His son is considered a reformer, but critics argue that he has notably censored the press, cracked down on pro-independence movements in contested regions of the Western Sahara, and banned the popular Islamist party Justice and Charity (al-Adl wa al-Ihsana) from political participation.

Beginning in late January 2011, a group of young Moroccans organized themselves as the February 20 Movement for Change. Inspired by protests in Tunisia and Egypt, they used online activism to gain support for nationwide protests to be held on February 20, 2011. They called for constitutional reform that would reduce King Mohammed VI's powers, including his power to dissolve the legislature, impose a state of emergency, and appoint key government officials.

The protestors' demands were numerous. Tahani Madman, a nineteen-year-old student and active member of the February 20 Movement, listed some of the movement's initial claims at a press conference on February 17 at the headquarters of the Moroccan Human Rights Association (AMDH) in Rabat. These claims would become more detailed in a national press motion released on March 13. In the official statement of the February 20 Movement, accessible on their Facebook page, they enumerated the desire for popular, democratic constitutional reform, an independent judiciary system, reduced corruption and trial for corrupt officials, the release of political prisoners, the "recognition of the Amazigh language [a dialect of Berber] as an official language like Arabic," in addition to a slew of labor and social goals such as transparency in hiring practices, opportunities for unemployed graduates, a guaranteed minimum wage, and access to public services for the poor. In their numerous viral campaign videos, including "I am Moroccan and..." where ordinary Moroccans listed why they would attend the planned February 20 protest, additional demands such as an end to police brutality, reduced living costs, health reform, and education reform were mentioned.

In advance of February 20, various peoples and groups threw their support behind the protest. Prince Moulay Hicham, a cousin of King Mohammed VI, declared his support in an interview with France 24 on February 18. Leftist, Islamist, and Berber nationalist groups joined forces throughout the country to aid and organize protests for the 20th. Political parties were more reserved, and the governing Independence Party expressed concerns that the movement lacked vision and responsible leadership. In addition, activists claimed that their online activities were blocked days before the protest. On February 19th, three activists appeared on state television to erroneously declare the protests had been canceled, some believe under coercion. The information was corrected in a swift, online campaign.

On February 20, approximately 37,000 people gathered throughout the country to demonstrate for constitutional reform, 4,000-5,000 of whom marched in the capital, Rabat. The February 20 Movement for Change was visibly joined by youths of the banned Islamist Justice and Charity opposition group, members of opposition parties, Berber nationalists, and other regional activist organizations like Baraka (Enough), which had been pushing for constitutional reform since its inception in 2005 and helped organize the march in the capital to support the "peaceful protest." In advance of the protests, buses were taken out of service in and between major cities to prevent damage, according to government officials. In the city of Marrakesh, mobs torched several cars and stone-throwing protesters clashed with police, who dispersed the crowd with truncheons.

On March 9, after three weeks of nationwide protests, the King spoke on television to announce nationwide reforms. He declared that he would establish the Advisory Commission to Revise the Constitution, and instruct its members to come up with measures to increase judicial independence and improve the separation of powers between branches of government. After receiving input from various parties and organizations (the February 20 Movement, for example, was invited to submit a proposal), they would submit a draft of the new constitution by June. The King also promised to hold free elections by September 2012, and allow the head of the party that won the most votes to become prime minister. This would be a departure from the previous policy of limiting the number of seats specific parties could hold in parliament.

The February 20 Youth Movement for Change immediately denounced the King's decision to draft a new constitution: "We are against this commission because it was appointed unilaterally, not democratically, and because the contours of the work of this commission were drawn by the king." Some members of the movement did agree to submit proposals to the newly established committee, but largely protest leaders did not participate, despite being invited by the government. A scheduled protest on March 20 went on as planned.

Deliberation in parliament by the new advisory committee also went on as planned. On April 8, the opening day of the new parliamentary session, the movement held a sit-in outside parliament calling for its dissolution, and protests were maintained throughout the two-week deliberations. Nonetheless, a draft for constitutional reform was produced, and on April 17, the King

presented it to the public. The draft reduced some of the political and religious powers of the sovereign, strengthened the powers of the Prime Minister as head of government (with perks such as the ability to dissolve the Parliament and increased power of appointment), increased judicial oversight, and established Berber as the second official language after Arabic. King Mohammed maintained, however, that he would retain his position at the helm of the cabinet, army, religious authorities and the judiciary. The proposals would be put to a referendum on July 1.

Protests continued in the months leading up to the referendum. Notably, on June 5, nearly 60,000 people convened in Rabat and Casablanca to demonstrate against police brutality, specifically against protesters. They carried a picture of Kamal Amari, who died from wounds he suffered during clashes with police on May 29 in Safi, about 200 miles south of Rabat. On July 28, protesters gathered in front of a courthouse in Safi to demand authorities free two arrested Sebti Gzoula demonstrators. They were arrested under claims of attacking government forces, a charge protesters believed false.

The July referendum received ninety-eight percent support, with seventy-three percent turnout. The movement denounced the popular vote on charges that the reform did not do enough to change the constitution, and even increased the monarch's absolute authority. Some activists also announced their suspicions regarding such high turnout, citing potential fraud by the regime. The February 20 Movement continued to hold regular demonstrations calling for further reforms, real institutional change, and even regime change, the last of which had not been supported by the majority of Moroccans. Moroccan authorities were generally tolerant of demonstrations. Despite continued protests, the new constitution was put into effect on August 1.

Elections were pushed forward from September 2012 to October 2011, and then November 2011. In advance of parliamentary elections to be held on November 25, 2011, protesters gathered in major cities calling for an election boycott. In Tangier, a group of protesters carried a mock casket draped in white with the words "parliamentary elections" written across it. About 200 police officers, equipped with metal riot shields, helmets and truncheons, cordoned off the square, but there were no clashes.

Only forty-five percent of registered voters turned out for the November 25th election. This was blamed in part on the continued election boycott by the February 20 Movement and the banned Justice and Spirituality party, among others. The moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), headed by Abdelilah Benkirane, would claim the win (if not the majority) on November 25th, obtaining 107 seats in the 395-member parliament. The independence-era Istiqlal Party, with 60 seats, came second. In accordance with the new constitution, the new coalition headed by Benkirane was installed in January.

Nationwide protests were called on the one-year anniversary of the movement and continued throughout 2012. After the election, however, the February 20 Movement lost a great deal of its support, failing to attract significant numbers in future protests. In addition, the Justice and Spirituality movement, a staunch ally since protests began in February, had withdrawn support from the February 20 Movement in December 2011. The movement was also weakened as members of the February 20 movement were jailed on occasion for participating in unauthorized protests. One of their last major protests, held on August 11, 2012, gathered 1,000 in Casablanca to protest a spike in fuel and food prices, and to call for the release of jailed activists. Another 300 people gathered in Rabat criticizing Prime Minister Benkirane and King Mohammed while waving anti-government banners. These were critically reduced showings: the movement no longer drew large support from the population.

This reflected a shift from concerns of political reform to concerns of economic reform under the new administration. Labor unions appeared in the forefront of anti-government and pro-reform protests in 2012, including a May protest organized by labor unions in Casablanca, Morocco's largest city, that saw 15,000-20,000 protesters demonstrate to improve salaries and social conditions in Morocco, accusing Prime Minister Benkirane of failing to deliver on reforms. This came after a government announcement in April of plans to submit a bill to regulate strikes by the end of the year. The planned legislation would force unions to hold direct talks with employers before being able to call a strike and could impose fines on employees who strike unlawfully. However Noubir Amaoui, who headed the Democratic Labour Confederation (CDT), the biggest union among public sector workers in Morocco, rejected any talks with the government about regulating strikes. Although the push for constitutional reform appeared to have ended, with the new constitution satisfying many people's political demands, union leaders capitalized on the protest movement to fight for economic reform.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by the Tunisian and Egyptian protests beginning in January 2011. This led the movement to adopt an online campaign strategy, and to organize protests as an effective act of social change.

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A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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