

184
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"LE TEMPS DES CERISES" IN RIF: analysis of a year of protests in northern Morocco

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In the always rebellious north, only a spark is needed to set everything alight, even if the day before everything has been totally calm". With these words a Spanish diplomat, the consul in Nador, tried to explain to the *ABC* newspaper in 1984 the intensity the protests had reached in the Rif region during the so-called "bread riots". Since Morocco's independence, the region's indomitable character, along with its economic, social and political distance from the state's central power, have been the seeds of various episodes of tension, such as that experienced over the past year in Al Hoceima Province, in the central Rif region. On this occasion, the detonator was the tragic death of Mouhcine Fikri, a young fishmonger crushed by a rubbish truck he had climbed into to retrieve goods seized by the police. From that moment on, rallies demanding justice for Fikri's death took place in the city of Al Hoceima and in less than a month a spontaneous local show of indignation had become a cycle of mass protests that spread throughout the province. That is when *Hirak al-Shaabi* (popular movement) was formed in Rif and other demands of a socioeconomic and cultural nature began to be raised by the demonstrators.

Despite the parallels initially sought with the death of Mohammed Bouazzi in Tunisia, the protests in Rif have not only been a reply to the *hogra* (humiliation by the authorities), corruption and inequality in which the population lives, but also a consequence of the region's being pushed to the periphery since the country's independence and the strengthening of regionalism as a political tendency and social movement in the regional political sphere over the past decade.

The protest cycle in Al Hoceima must be understood from a historical perspective and as the result of persistent central problems that affect the territory's governance, such as territorial imbalances, a limited process of transitional justice and the consequences of the reconfiguration of the neopatrimonial system.

The persistence of asymmetries of an economic, political and social nature within the country has given way to several centre-periphery conflicts, prompting the emergence of various regionalist tendencies in Rif.

Al Hoceima presents one of the lowest local development indexes and this made it easy for discontent and the sensation of abandonment among the population to emerge in the form of social protest.

The Amazigh associations have played a prominent role as a source of the diffusion of a regionalist consciousness.

The tense calm currently experienced in Al Hoceima should not be used to underplay the transcendence and impact of mobilisations on the province, the rest of the country and the Moroccan political system.

What distances the Rif region from Morocco's political centre?

Historically, Rif has been represented as a region in tension with the central authority and an important focus of rebellion and opposition. Its resistance to colonial power during the Spanish protectorate helped strengthen this image, which has been perpetuated throughout Morocco's post-colonial history, with it having been the source of various contentious episodes since independence was achieved in 1956. Since then, the persistence of asymmetries of an economic, political and social nature within the country has given way to several

centre-periphery conflicts, prompting the emergence of various regionalist tendencies in Rif.

Although the accession to the throne of Mohammed VI meant a new policy towards the region was put in place, the protest cycle that has taken place in Al Hoceima over the past year has revealed the persistence of central problems affecting the Moroccan state's governance of this territory.

Interregional economic inequalities

From the economic point of view, the development of Rif and Al Hoceima Province in particular have been affected by the mountainous nature of the terrain, the access and communications difficulties with the rest of the country and the absence of an integrated and effective economic development plan. From independence until the start of the first decade of the 2000s, the public policies aimed at the region had little impact on the modernisation of the regional economy, whose main sources of wealth have been outside formal economic cycles, specifically: remittances from emigrated Riffians, contraband with Ceuta and Melilla, and the cultivation and sale of hashish.

With Mohammed VI's accession to the throne, the north of the country benefitted from his policy of grand projects and grand infrastructure works, especially in terms of road, air and railway connections (such as the construction of the "Rocade Méditerranée" road between Tangiers and Algerian

The protests in Rif are a consequence of the region's being pushed to the periphery.

border, the expansion of the motorway and road networks, the improvements to Nador and Al Hoceima airports, the Tangiers-Agadir high-speed train line and the Taourirt-Nador connection), the building of new ports and industrial areas (the Tanger-Med I and II ports and their free zone, the Nador West Med port and the industrial free zone of Beni Ansar I and II ports), the promotion and development of the Mediterranean coast for tourists, and various programmes of rural electrification and drinking water supply.

In the case of Al Hoceima province, the turning point in the state's investment in the area took place after the 2004 earthquake, when a programme of reconstruction and improved accessibility was launched for the province that included the improvement and expansion of communication infrastructure and networks, rural and urban renovation measures and investment in the tourism, sea fishing and agriculture sectors.

Despite the province experiencing significant changes and improvements after the earthquake in terms of infrastructure and refurbishment, the state's development policy in the area was strongly criticised by various sectors of civil society. Its excessive centralism and the absence of channels for the sub-state institutions and authorities, social agents and the local population to participate in defining the lines of investment have been seen as obstacles to the elimination of the great interregional imbalances that persist on the Moroccan Medi-

terranean coast. So, while the Tangiers-Tétouan axis and the province of Nador have managed to consolidate themselves as the two industrial poles in the north of the country, the state investment in Al Hoceima has focussed principally on the development of tourism projects, to the detriment of other economic activities, such as recovering the industrial structure which could absorb the unemployed workforce. This tendency has been much questioned in recent years by various political and social actors in Al Hoceima, who consider that the state has only dedicated itself to superficial questions instead of designing and implementing a real economic plan and developing the area.

When the crisis broke out in October 2016, the economic and social situation of Al Hoceima, with one of the lowest local development indexes, made it easy for discontent and the sensation of abandonment among the population to emerge in the form of social protest. Thus, the lack of opportunities for a population that is mainly young and of working age (64.1%), with a rate of unemployment of 16.3% (above the national average), and with 25.1% dependent on family assistance, meant that the death of Fikri became a grievance for the whole of local society and that the protests were widely supported.

An unfinished reconciliation

From the political point of view, since independence, Rif has been the site of various episodes of revolt and repression that have served as the soil in which the distrust Riffians have shown of the *majzén* (court) and the monarchy has grown. This feeling of resentment was clearly evident during the whole of Hassan II's reign due to the economic and political isolation to which the region was subject and the public disdain the monarch displayed towards its population on various occasions.

Mohammed VI's arrival on the throne led to a change in the relationships between the monarchy and Rif, thanks to his frequent trips to the area and the inclusion of some local actors in the circles of power. Despite these gestures, for broad sectors of civil society, definitive reconciliation between the region and the monarchy is still some way off, given the state's reluctance to undertake a genuine process of transitional justice and to accommodate the different identity sensibilities that exist in the country.

Firstly, the community reparation measures proposed by the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER), the body created in 2004 to investigate and redress the human rights violations committed from independence until the end of Hassan II's reign, have not managed to satisfy much of Rif civil society, especially in the province of Al Hoceima, where various platforms have since 2005 been demanding greater economic and political redress by the state. Among these demands are: the request for apologies from the state for repressive practices used against the Rif population in 1958-9, 1984 and 1987; respect and recognition for the political, social and cultural rights of the region; an end to the state's deliberate policy of marginalisation; and the establishment of a democratic framework of organisation that guarantees genuine self-governance to Rif.

Secondly, neither the advanced regionalisation nor the constitutional reform of 2011 have provided a response to the requests for the recognition of the local Amazigh (Berber) language, Tarifit, in the different spheres of public life, a higher degree of self-government for Rif and the legalisation of political parties with a regional base. The absence of these issues in both reforms provoked the local parts of the February 20 movement to react by including a claim for the autonomy of Rif in their repertoire of demands for political change in the 2011 and 2012 protest cycles. This inclusion enormously influenced the emergence of certain specific dynamics in Al Hoceima Province which may be considered the precursor of some of the actions taken by the popular movement Hirak in the past year. Among them the progressive localisation and specification of the demands stand out, in particular the socioeconomic demands as well as the use of the flag of the Republic of the Rif – previously a complete taboo in the region’s public sphere – as a means of expressing a community identity and a political commitment that places it outside the traditional channels of the Moroccan political system.¹

For the leaders of Hirak, the past year’s social mobilisation is founded on certain demands that, though present for more than a decade among the local civil society, have still not been addressed. To them, the reconciliation promoted by the state has only benefitted a small group of people² – the new Riffian elites linked to the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM)³ that have been incapable of acting as mediators between the Moroccan regime and the demonstrators in this last phase of containment.

The strengthening of a politicised regional identity

From the social point of view, Rif’s isolation has also been one of the factors driving the creation of the different groups with regional sensibilities that have been appearing since the seventies. Of these groups, the Amazigh associations have played a prominent role as a source of the diffusion of a regionalist consciousness, and as a space for the construction of a cultural framework and other common values among the local population. For most young people in the region, the Amazigh militancy has been the main – if not only – medium in which they have developed their political socialisation. It is no surprise, therefore, that the most prominent flags at the demonstrations and rallies held over the past year have been those of the Amazigh movement and the Republic of the Rif.

From midway through the first decade of the 21st century, civil society activity around the regional question in Rif and Al Hoceima in particular steadily began to grow, thanks to the formation of various platforms dedicated to the debate

1. Suárez-Collado, Ángela. "Territorial Stress in Morocco: From Democratic to Autonomist Demands in Popular Protests in the Rif", *Mediterranean Politics*, 20:2, 217–234, 2015.
2. "El activista que saca de quicio al rey de Marruecos", *El Español*, January 9th 2017. Available at https://www.elespanol.com/mundo/20170108/184481894_0.html.
3. The PAM is a political party created in 2008 at the initiative of Fouad Ali El Himma, the closest friend of King Mohammed VI.

on regionalisation and Rif autonomy, like the Northern Rif Forum for Dialogue, the Northern Morocco Human Rights Forum and the Movement for Rif Autonomy. Despite the fact that none of these organisations have been legalised by the state authorities, the expansion of social networks and the internet as means of communication and socialisation has allowed the debate around the regional issue to spread and their discourse to be disseminated among the youth population in the region, as became clear during the 2011 and 2012 mobilisations.

It must be pointed out that these mobilisations served as training for many of the young Hirak militants, both in relation to the police and judicial repression, and in the negotiation with the authorities and the viability of demands. Since the protests started, the movement’s leaders have insisted that the demonstrations be peaceful and have strictly socioeconomic demands, with the aim of recruiting as much of the population as possible and denying the authorities reasons for repression. As a result, subjects such as the demand for greater autonomy for Rif were left out of the demands and the exclusive presence of Amazigh and Republic of the Rif flags at the demonstrations has been justified by saying they are symbols with regional significance.

Ultimately, the socioeconomic demands, the deliberate discourse of marginalisation, and the regional symbols that have characterised the protest cycle in the past year in Al Hoceima must be understood from a historical perspective and as the

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result of persistent central problems that affect the territory’s governance, such as territorial imbalances, a limited process of transitional justice and the consequences of the reconfiguration of the neopatrimonial system.

From the tolerance to the repression of the “Hirak al-Shaabi” popular movement

The tragic death of Mouhcine Fikri on October 28th 2016, as he tried to retrieve 500 kilos of swordfish confiscated by the maritime fishing authorities and the police, made two realities clear that form part of and affect the daily lives of Moroccans: on the one hand, the permissiveness of the authorities towards the informal sector as a means of guaranteeing social peace; and on the other hand, the lack of protection when facing the arbitrariness of officials.

The seizing of the goods was a response to the prohibition on swordfish fishing at that time of year. However, the existence of this ban has not stopped either their catching or commercialisation taking place throughout the year via illegal networks that operate in the port of Al Hoceima with the blessing of the authorities. The arbitrariness of the officials when sanctioning or permitting illegal activities and public sector corruption are among the problems that most affect Morocco’s population, where up to 48% of the users of public

services are obliged to pay for access to them.⁴ It is therefore no surprise that when the videos and images of Fikri's death were broadcast, his *hogra* quickly became the *hogra* of a whole region.

For the weeks immediately following Fikri's death, the almost daily rallies in the main square in Al Hoceima managed to bring together all sections of the population, and when Nasser Zefzafi became the leader of the protest it gave rise to the formation of the self-named HIRAK al-Shaabi, the Popular Movement of the Rif. The mobilisation at that point centred on certain specific requests from the state: the derogation of the *dahir* of 1958 that established Al Hoceima as a military zone;⁵ an end to the economic blockade of the region and the generalised corruption; an improved employment situation in the area and an end to unemployment, above all among the young; the establishment of programmes that improve agricultural production and the creation of industrial infrastructure; improvements to the province's communications network; setting up a pluridisciplinary university, training institutes and more schools; the construction of a new hospital, an oncology centre, local dispensaries and a centre for the disabled; an end to the confiscation of collective lands; and

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the inclusion of the Amazigh language in the justice system.

The evolution of the protest cycle has been greatly influenced by its coincidence in time with the political blockage that delayed the formation of the new government by six months (from October to April). During this time, the absence of a clear interlocutor between the central authorities and the passivity of the *majzén* in deactivating the protests, probably with the intention of destabilising and blocking the possible formation of a government by Abdelilah Benkirane, contributed to strengthening the protest movement. In this way, a wide repertoire of collective action was able to be put in place, with the organisation of rallies, demonstrations and large mobilisations on specific days of celebration (December 10th for Human Rights Day, February 6th to commemorate the death of Abdelkrim, March 8th for International Women's Day, and July 20th for the Battle of Annual), pot-banging protests, strikes, and boycott campaigns against large Moroccan companies.

The protest cycle had its first turning point at the end of March when, with the government coalition already formed, the new government began to take a more active role in han-

dling the conflict with the aim of subduing the protests and avoiding their potential spread to other parts of the country. Thus, on the one hand, it sought to provide a response to the demands of the population by allocating economic contributions of up to €900 million to setting up various projects and the acceleration of the "Al Hoceima, the Beacon of the Mediterranean" development programme, the implementation of which had been greatly delayed. And it was likewise decided to dismiss the provincial governor and twenty authorities from the central administration in Al Hoceima Province, to be replaced by others of Riffian origin, thus answering a historical request made in the 18-point programme presented by important local figures to King Mohammed V after the 1958–59 revolt.

On the other hand, and in parallel, other measures were aimed at stopping the mobilisations and delegitimising the movement and its aims. Thus, more security forces were deployed in the region, with the goal of dissuading the participants in the protests, and various media campaigns and government declarations focussed on portraying a violent image of the demonstrators, who began to be accused of being separatists and of being instigated and financed by "foreign elements".

Neither of the two strategies managed to stop the protests. In contrast, during the months of April and May the demonstrations and rallies grew in intensity and frequency, while the government found itself unable to establish effective channels of dialogue with the leaders of the movement,

who did not recognise as legitimate mediators the authorities, political party representatives and local associations the ministerial delegations met on their trips to the province. For the leaders of HIRAK, both the government and the other local political actors were responsible for the inefficiency with which they had addressed the region's problems and lacked a real connection with the population, meaning that, in their strategy of standing up to power and strengthening the legality of their protest, they decided to raise their demands directly with the king.

The next turning point in the evolution of the movement took place at the end of May 2017, when a wave of arrests that affected both the leaders of HIRAK and a large number of its members began to weaken the protest cycle. The trigger, this time, was the confrontation Zefzafi had with the imam in the Mohammed VI mosque in Al Hoceima, whom he reproached, saying that he was using the sermon and places of worship to disparage the popular movement and for political motives in support of the Moroccan regime.

From that moment on the repression against HIRAK reached its climax in the form of detentions and the violent prohibition of the demonstrations, progressively weakening the movement and making the continuity of the protests more difficult. Then a new phase begins in which the king, surprisingly absent throughout the whole mobilisation cycle, goes on to play a central role in handling the crisis and thereby manages to strengthen the executive role of the monarchy. His first action used the Throne Day celebration on July 30th to

4. "People and corruption: Middle East and North Africa Survey 2016", Global Corruption Barometer. https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/people_and_corruption_mena_survey_2016.

5. This was a symbolic demand, as the condition of militarised zone had been annulled in the 1959 administrative reform.

pardon 146 Hirak prisoners. This is the only specific consideration the monarch has given to the Rif situation. The other actions taken in recent months have been aimed at evaluating the government's actions and consolidating his position as the final arbiter and judge in the country's political processes. For this, he instigated the creation of a parliamentary investigation commission and requested ministerial reports as well as asking the Court of Auditors about the causes of the delays to the development plans for Al Hoceima, the results of which have been used to discredit the country's political class, to dismiss various ministers and high-ranking officials and strengthen his hegemonic position over the country's government.

The anniversary of Fikri's death on October 28th went almost unnoticed due to the prohibition by the local authorities of the organisation of any kind of act that might affect public order and the climate of tranquillity they consider is being experienced since the reactivation of the province's development plans. Thus, Hirak's protest actually took place in the country's prisons. With more than 400 detainees, every trial is celebrated as a political act in defence of the movement and its demands, such that, during the cases, the defendants do not hesitate to declare slogans such as "death before humiliation", and their lawyers have no qualms about comparing the cases with the trials held in the country during the "lead years".

For broad sectors of civil society, definitive reconciliation between the region and the monarchy is still some way off.

"The time of cherries" seems to be over in Rif, but the tense calm currently experienced in Al Hoceima should not be used to underplay the transcendence and impact of mobilisations on the province, the rest of the country and the Moroccan political system. At a local level, the repression has obliged many young people to emigrate away from the country, and hundreds of families have been forced to divide their lives between prison visits and the fight for the liberation of the detainees. At the same time, the reactivation of development plans on pause for years have been pushed forward. At state level, the protests in Al Hoceima have not only managed to resonate in other parts of the country, such as Beni Mellal, Imintanoute, Ouarzazate, Zagora and Tinghir, where demonstrations of lower intensity have sprung up demanding greater social justice, better infrastructure and access to healthcare and education; they have also provided evidence of the existence of a political representation crisis, which affects not only the political parties but also other forms of representation, such as civil society organisations and associations. Finally, the protests have managed to show both the deficiencies in the state's capacity to govern the territory, as well as the weaknesses in the country's existing governance mechanisms.