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MOROCCAN PROTESTS OFFER A TEMPLATE FOR THE ARAB WORLD

Francis Ghiles, Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

Social protests are not unheard of in Morocco – indeed they are regular features of the calendar and although they have not threatened, to date, the overall stability of the country, let alone the monarchy, they point to the persistence of large income disparities, high unemployment among young people (the percentage of Moroccans between 15-24 who were neither at school, in training or had a job in 2017 was a staggering 29.3% according to government statistics) and rising living costs.

Protest took on an altogether new form in late April when an online boycott campaign against three leading Moroccan oligopolies, using hashtags such as “let it rot” was joined by 57% of Moroccans, according the Moroccan daily *L’Economiste*. The campaign was fuelled by increasing consumer prices and high levels of unemployment. One of the 2 million Facebook pages backing the boycott, known as *al muqataa*, explained that the movement’s aim was “to unite the Moroccan people and speak with one voice against expensive prices, poverty, unemployment, injustice, corruption and despotism”.

So far, protesters have achieved nothing comparable to what happened in Jordan a few weeks ago where mass street demonstrations eventually forced the resignation of the Prime Minister, Habib Mulki and the repeal of proposals for an increase in taxes which was one of the conditions included in a \$723m International Monetary Fund loan to the kingdom. In neighbouring Egypt, protests erupted last month after the government increased metro fares by 250%. Dissent in Egypt is much more severely repressed than in Jordan or Morocco but no one knows whether further hikes to the gasoline prices, which have just been raised by 50%, would spark more protests. Meanwhile the manner of the Moroccan protests may prove to be more effective in countries where the state is authoritarian.

The campaign has targeted Afriquia petrol stations and the Sidi Ali and Oulmes mineral water brands, both of which belong to very wealthy businessmen and women who are close to King Mohamed 6th and the multinational Danone which, as of early June had lost \$15.9m as a result of unsold dairy products and decided to cut back purchases of milk from farmer suppliers by a third who in turn called for an end to the boycott. Milk prices had not been increase recently.

A cabinet minister, Lahcen Daoudi, resigned after participating in a sit-in organised by Danone workers who blamed both the government and the boycott

for their predicament. The boycott is all the more effective for carefully selecting its targets and the political message cannot be misread: angry consumers describe their targets as “thieves” and “bloodsuckers”. They are careful to avoid attacking the monarch’s economic interests but do not shy from attacking his friends. The campaign is being carefully watched in neighbouring Algeria and Tunisia as it could provide a template for social protests there and in other Arab countries.

Boycotts’ Advantages and Disadvantages

In the eyes of its organisers, this new form of protest has three advantages: It hurts the economic interests of powerful families with close ties to the monarchy; the initiators remain anonymous, although the Moroccan NGO Transparency International has evoked “intense suppression” of the boycott by the government; and it invites no easy retribution for the security forces whose heavy handed suppression of protests in Al Hoceima, in the norther Rif region in the winter of 2016-17 and Jerada a year later lead to hundreds of arrests and a few deaths.

Yet the very structure of the boycotts limits their ability to articulate clear demands and does not allow for any subsequent negotiation with the government or representatives of the palace. That said, boycotts do allow the poor to have a say as never before. They highlight more clearly than hitherto the deep resentment shared by a vast majority of Moroccans, not simply from the poorer but also from the educated middle classes fell about incestuous relationship of the political leaders and the monarchy with business interests. The Moroccan authorities or Makhzen have, since independence been very adroit at handling protests but explosions of huge violence are not unknown as during the riots in Casablanca in 1981. Whether the boycotts escalate into violence and wrong foot the Makhzen, time will tell. What is not in doubt is that thanks to the Al Jazeera TV channel which is, widely watched from Jordan to Morocco, from Egypt to Algeria and Tunisia, people across the Arab world know immediately what is going on thousands of miles away. In 2011 the fire in Tunisia spread quickly: a repeat cannot be ruled out.

Morocco had weathered the Arab Spring relatively well but the media are more tightly muzzled today that in the immediate aftermath of the Arab revolts when huge protests across the kingdom led many Moroccans to believe their country was, finally, moving towards greater freedom of expression, if not democracy. A further subject of concern in Morocco relates to the prolonged absences from his country by the king, not least for reasons of ill-health. Every key decision in Morocco is taken in the palace which is why such absences inevitably slow down the machinery of government.

Two of the main targets of the boycott are worth a closer look. Afriquia – a network of modern petrol stations set up across the kingdom a decade or so ago, belongs to the private energy group, Akwa, whose majority shareholder is Aziz Akhannouch. Akwa is a publicly traded company which focuses on petroleum gas and chemicals. His wife holds the Moroccan franchises for Gap, Zara and Galleries Lafayette. The Akhannouch family fortune is estimated by Forbes Magazine at \$1.8bn which would rank Aziz Akhannouch as Morocco’s second richest man after the king. The net worth of the monarch, whose family are the most important private investors in the kingdom, is estimated by the same source at \$5bn.

Mr Akhannouch also plays an important political role as leader of the National Rally of Independents, a party which has close links with the king and has been is a key member of successive coalition governments led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party over the years. He has held the strategic Agriculture and Fisheries portfolio since 2007, which makes him the interface of Morocco and the

EU. For many Moroccans, he and his wife symbolise the marriage, some would say the collusion, between politics, money and the palace which, in their views runs the country.

The owners of the Sidi Ali and Oulmes mineral waters are Holmarkom, which belongs to the Bensalah family. Its best known member, Meriem Bensalah Chekroun, was until recently the CEO of the employers' federation, CGEM. The sources of these waters lie in the poor farming region around Khemisset, where local schools and hospitals are rudimentary. It would be difficult to argue however that poor Moroccans drink Sidi Ali, hence the question arises as to whether the boycotts are politically motivated? Indeed neither Meriem Bensalah nor Aziz Akhannouch have any lost love for the PJD but, to date it is impossible to know if any group in particular has initiated the boycott. What is not in doubt is that the mixture of contempt or indifference with which its launch was greeted by the owners of these companies initially played into the hands of the organisers.

It is not often that the voice of ordinary, let alone poor people is heard in the Arab world. In Morocco time will tell whether this type of boycott continues or if it acts as a template for others in the region. The reasons which underpin these protests will not go away: high rates of poverty and unemployment, prices rising faster than income, especially when the price of oil or wheat goes up worldwide, endemic corruption and conspicuous wealth displayed by a small oligarchy of rulers.