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# A New Generation of Protests in Morocco? How Hirak al-Rif Endures

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Protesters carrying the picture of Nasser Zafzafi, leader of Hirak al-Rif, and the Amazigh flag during a solidarity demonstration in the Rabat, Morocco, June 2017

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In October 2016, in the oft-neglected mountainous region of northwestern Morocco, a new popular protest movement, Hirak al-Rif, emerged. In line with the February 20 Movement in 2011, Hirak al-Rif represents a new wave of mass mobilization against the ruling authority. Though initially marked by intermittent peaceful protests, the movement escalated in summer 2017, during the month of Ramadan, following the arrests of numerous activists, including the movement's leader Nasser Zafzafi. This repression of peaceful protests risks diverse consequences, including the further escalation of the situation and the radicalization of the movement, as well as a transformation of political demands and potential calls for separatism.

At first glance, Hirak al-Rif appears to be a continuation of the February 20 Movement, particularly with respect to the shared underlying grievances of the two movements. Both are the result of social and political tensions, high unemployment rates as well as the prevalence of corruption throughout the government. However, in-depth analysis of the two movements brings to light several key differences. Hirak al-Rif's concentration in a defined geographical area and its durability, despite the repressive approach adopted by the authorities, marks a significant difference from the February 20 Movement, whose activities began to dissolve only a few months after they began. Assessing the social and political factors contributing to the emergence of each movement as well as the differences in protest tactics and strategies sheds light on the reasons for the survival of Hirak al-Rif and the decline of the February 20 Movement. The principal factors behind the resilience of Hirak al-Rif include the movement's ability to create a unified identity and the activists' ingenuity in devising protest strategies and diversifying tactics. This has contributed to the uniformity and clarity of the movement's demands and structure, as well as its independence from all political parties. The February 20 Movement, on the other hand, proved unable to create a unified identity, leading to its eventual demise.

## The Rif: A History of Repression and Neglect

While similar structural factors, including political tensions, corruption, and



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authoritarianism, underlie the grievances of both Hirak al-Rif and the February 20 Movement, the evolution of the two movements diverge with respect to their nature, organizational format, repertoire of contention, and use of social media. For the activists of Hirak al-Rif, these factors greatly influenced the durability of protests and their resilience.

The February 20 Movement benefited from the strong national identity connecting Moroccans throughout the country. In 2011, thousands of activists simultaneously took to the streets in 70 cities and villages across the kingdom to form the largest political protest the country had ever witnessed. The February 20 Movement represented a new generation of mass protest, focusing on national political demands, such as combatting corruption and authoritarianism along with constitutional reforms, as well as social demands. While the emergence of the movement coincided with the driving force of the Arab Spring, the Moroccan government – unlike other Arab ruling authorities – chose to engage positively with the protestors' demands. The monarchy proposed comprehensive political and constitutional reforms, including an amendment to the constitution that stipulated the majority party in parliament would appoint the prime minister, and calling for early elections which would allow the popular Justice and Development Party to form the government.

Although the Rif region was not isolated from the initial protests of the February 20 Movement, the historical and cultural differences present in the Rif region engendered a greater potential for volatility. The brutal repression of the 1958 popular uprising left the region with a lasting memory of injustice that translated to distrust of the state. This tense relationship the Moroccan authorities led to a deliberate neglect of the Rif region, depriving it of development projects in a policy of intentional favouring of other regions. Indeed, the government only began investing in the Rif after the 2004 earthquake that had disastrous effects across the region. Despite this renewed interest, the Rif still suffers from high unemployment rates particularly among youth, in comparison with the national average.<sup>1</sup> Yet, though the government paid little attention to the Rif, other Moroccan cities and members of the diaspora organized marches in solidarity with the region and its popular protest movement. Such symbolic gestures of unity, however, caused the Moroccan authorities to stigmatize the movement, claiming they receive "funds



from abroad" despite attempts by Hirak al-Rif leaders to reassure national public opinion and reaffirm their connection to national identity.

### The resilience of Hirak al-Rif

Strikingly, the question of repression has not proven a relevant factor in the ability of either Hirak al-Rif or the February 20 Movement to survive: Hirak al-Rif has become known for its perseverance despite arrest campaigns and a continued protest ban, while the February 20 Movement, subjected to less pressure from police forces, quickly petered out. The reasons for the resilience of one movement over the other lie in internal factors rather than the external actions of the regime.

The February 20 Movement struggled due to internal conflicts and its inability to create a unified identity. From its very beginnings, the February 20 Movement consisted largely of groups that were politicized or had the ability to be politicized due to a blend of ideological and political currents. These differences in ideological and political beliefs greatly impacted the movement's political dialogue and demands. However, the February 20 Movement had diverse key political concerns such as combatting corruption and authoritarianism, amending the constitution, the dissolution of parliament, an independent justice system, as well as class demands such as the integration of the unemployed in the civil service. The common factor among these demands was the absence of well-defined, phased objectives and executable procedures.

The Movement's identity crisis was exacerbated by the group's division into two contradicting currents: the Reformists and the Radicals. While the Reformists advocated for the adoption of a parliamentary monarchy, the Radicals had more ambitious demands that included reforming the political system itself. These internal discrepancies resulted in ambiguity in the February 20 Movement's end goals, thereby leading to distrust of the movement by average Moroccans. Due to the lack of political expertise among the February 20 Movement's leaders, the Moroccan authorities were able to exploit the group's internal conflicts, particularly between the Islamists and leftists as well as the Radicals and Reformists. This resulted in the withdrawal of al-Adl Wa al-Ihssane Association from the movement and the eventual breakdown of the movement's activities.



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In contrast, Hirak al-Rif activists established achievable social and political demands early on. From the outset, the movement's activists drafted a list of demands, including the right to a fair trial, demilitarization of the Rif, encouraging investment and infrastructure development, as well as the construction of a university, hospital, and a cancer treatment centre in the region. The demands gained enough support that a royal intervention was necessary to resolve the tension in the region.

Additionally, Hirak al-Rif was able to establish a shared identity among its members built upon common feelings of injustice and marginalization as well as the Amazigh-Rif identity, creating harmony within the group. This shared identity was strengthened through flying the Amazigh and Rif Republic flags in place of the Moroccan flag. These flags are powerful symbols of the regional identity that are at the centre of the movement. Indeed, this common identity among Hirak al-Rif members will grow stronger if the authorities continue to hinder the implementation of reforms in the region.

In addition to the binding force of shared identity, Hirak al-Rif has benefited from the particular capacities of the group's leader, Nasser Zafzafi. Proficient in numerous languages and capable of alternating between his mother tongue (Amazigh-Rifi), the Moroccan dialect (Darija), and Standard Arabic, Zafzafi's speeches include a mixture of ideological and political statements that cross traditional divisions, bridging the Islamist and secular as well as Arab and Amazigh. Zafzafi focuses his dialogue on developmental and political demands, particularly unemployment, poverty, and corruption, and refers to cultural and religious issues, particularly his pride in local Amazigh culture. He also employs religious terminology in his harsh criticism of state-controlled religious institutions and the state's exploitation of religion to justify its policies. To this point, Zafzafi was first inspired to protest after hearing a Friday sermon calling for loyalty to the King and an end to all protest, which he considered an abuse of religion by the state.<sup>2</sup>

Zafzafi has also been successful in bypassing political parties and channelling the movement's demands directly to the seat of power, the King. Hirak al-Rif activists criticize elite members of the government for being ineffective in addressing the problems of their region. Aware of this lack of confidence in political parties and



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lower-ranking government officials, Zafzafi addressed the King directly and called on him to intervene personally. This detachment from other institutionalized political actors became a source of legitimacy for Hirak al-Rif movement - unlike the February 20 Movement. And beyond the personal capacities of Zafzafi, Hirak al-Rif has produced other strong leaders, consequently creating a more efficient organization that has allowed the movement to persevere against the authorities' oppression, a feat unobtained by the February 20 Movement.

Parallel to the existence of a unified leadership and specific demands, the movement's members have built an internal network that includes an organizational committee, a media committee, as well as the management structure. This organizational framework has contributed to the viability of the movement. The effectiveness of the movement's network of activists was highlighted during the preparations for the 18 May 2017 demonstrations, as the movement's organizational committee oversaw all details related to the protests to ensure they would not take a violent turn. A group of local websites extensively reported on the demonstrations, which spread the movement's message outside the Rif region, even reaching the diaspora in Europe. This active network has ensured that protests have continued even when the movement's highest leaders are imprisoned.

Social media also played an important role in the mobilization of both movements; however, Hirak al-Rif used it more effectively. The February 20 protests were launched through calls on social media; yet, unlike other countries in the region that reacted to specific national events, February 20 was the result of waves of protest throughout the Arab world in 2011 and not a specific Moroccan incident per se. Hirak al-Rif, on the other hand, was founded for reasons similar to those in other Arab countries. Following the tragic death of Muhsin Fikri, a fishmonger who was crushed by a garbage truck after trying to retrieve his products confiscated by the authorities, the photos of his mangled body on social media fueled feelings of anger and injustice. Hirak al-Rif activists had learned from the mistakes of the February 20 Movement and efficiently employed social media in their campaigns. Zafzafi created a Facebook page that attracted tens of thousands of followers and his Facebook live videos were watched by hundreds of thousands of viewers. No Moroccan politician has achieved this viewership, except



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for Abdelilah Benkirane before being removed from the prime minister's office.

The protest style of Hirak al-Rif movement has also contributed to its viability. The February 20 Movement adopted a classical protest pattern and took to the streets after calls on social media. However, unlike Hirak al-Rif which organized vigils and protests almost daily, the February 20 Movement's demonstrations were held more sporadically and were centred in major cities such as Rabat, Casablanca, Tangiers, and Fez. This was due to the internal divisions within the February 20 Movement and its nationalistic nature. The dispersion of the movement over tens of cities also rendered coordination among different protest points more difficult, compared to the local coordination of Hirak al-Rif activists. Despite establishing organizations on the national and local levels to organize protests, the February 20 Movement's decision-making process remained lengthy and uncoordinated.

In contrast, Hirak al-Rif combined a wide range of tactics and forms of protest and developed new repertoires of contention, which helps explain Hirak al-Rif's success in organizing over 700 events, including demonstrations, vigils, and protests. In al-Houceima alone, 145 protests occurred within seven months, October 2016 to late May 2017, despite the authorities repeatedly implementing protest bans. Additionally, impromptu protests broke out in slums and a large-scale demonstration was held on 18 May 2017. New tactics emerged from these mobilizations which would strengthen the group's durability. Among these tactics was an oath Zafzafi took in front of protestors where he pledged to carry on the struggle at all costs. This earned him widespread popularity among the movement's activists as he appeared prepared to sacrifice his life for Hirak al-Rif. The activists also challenged the authorities' bans and ongoing repression against the movement by protesting on rooftops, beating pots at night, as well as protesting at sea. When the authorities banned the 2 July 2017 demonstration in al-Houceima and closed the entrances to the city to prevent protestors from entering, they found nonconventional points of access through mountains and water passages. These are all new and unprecedented tactics in the history of protests in Morocco, which have allowed the movement to continuously renew itself and reinforce the resolve of its members.

## Conclusion





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Morocco was not able to escape the wave of protests that swept across the Arab world during the Arab Spring in 2011, and while two unique groups developed out of these initial demonstrations, the differences in collective identity, organizational format, and repertoires of contention indicate that the February 20 Movement and Hirak al-Rif are not interchangeable. The February 20 Movement struggled with internal tensions that hindered the creation of a common identity among its members. This, coupled with inconsistent protests, eventually led to the group's decline. On the other hand, Hirak al-Rif has persevered despite protest bans and imprisonment of its members because of its strong internal organization, a shared identity, and innovative protest styles. Today, even in the face of growing frustrations, Hirak al-Rif remains united and strong.

After almost 10 months of protest, tensions are still running high throughout Morocco. The accumulation of frustrations due to police repression and the absence of a political resolution will likely lead to a radicalization of the demands from Hirak al-Rif. Protests are still largely confined to the Rif region; however, they are spreading, particularly to Amazigh regions that have been subjected to decades of marginalization, which could further increase tensions. Nonetheless, the Moroccan state still has the possibility to defuse the mounting tensions. The authorities could show good faith by releasing Hirak's members from prison and directly involving the royal palace in all negotiations with the movement in order to reach a compromise that would alleviate future frustrations.

[jeunefrique.com](http://jeunefrique.com)





## Endnotes

1. Nadia Lamlili, "Tensions à El Hoceima: les chiffres des inégalités sociales qui expliquent la grogne marocaine", jeuneafrique.com, 25 May 2017, available at
2. Lmaghrib TV, "الاحتجاجات في العيون: تظاهرات عمال المناجم تطالب بوقف الترسيعات", video YouTube "[الاحتجاجات في العيون: تظاهرات عمال المناجم تطالب بوقف الترسيعات](#)" at available ,2017 May 26 .5:51 ,video YouTube "[الاحتجاجات في العيون: تظاهرات عمال المناجم تطالب بوقف الترسيعات](#)".



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