Human Rights Action and Social Movements in Morocco

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Moroccan protesters shout "famine kills in Morocco" in support of the victims of Essaouira food aid distribution stampede - November 2017 © EPA-EFE/STR
The human rights movement in Morocco started even before the foreign protectorate system crumbled as national movement strengthened and as urban youth rose against colonialism to demand an end to foreign rule. After independence in 1956, the Moroccan human rights movement, guided by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, worked to promulgate the public freedoms law in 1958, four years before Morocco’s first constitution was enacted.

Since independence, the human rights movement has undergone several transformations. This paper focuses on three pivotal relations that shaped this evolution. These are the relationships and networks of interactions that human rights actors engaged in with the student movement, trade unions and, finally, civil society actors in the field of social and economic rights.

Moroccan students started to organize and agitate in France for an end to foreign rule in the last two decades of the French protectorate. After independence in 1956, the student movement established the National Union for Moroccan students or Union National des Etudiants du Marco (UNEM), which focused on students’ academic and social conditions and their demands before it fractured under the weight of its political and ideological differences culminating into the failure of its 16th Congress in 1981. The resulting climate of extreme tension and violence divided the student movement into warring factions along ideological lines. In the early 2000s and after the introduction of university reform laws, the rights-based student activists started to adopt regional and ethnic causes rather than the ideologically motivated (largely leftist) positions they had theretofore championed. Saharawi and Amazigh student organizations were established, whereby regional and ethnic dimensions started to shape the Moroccan student movement and deploy a human rights’ discourse much more than their leftist and Islamist peers and predecessors on campuses.

Since its inception, the labour movement in Morocco has been influenced by the human rights discourse even before rights organizations were set up in the 1970s, at which time several trade union cadres joined them as well. One of the most prominent figures of this trend was AbdelHamid Amine who led the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, Association Marocaine des Droits Humains (AMDH), in parallel with his work at the Moroccan Workers’ Union, Union Marocain de Travail (UMT). Below we will explore how labour leaders reconciled their trade-
union work and their rights activism when the two clashed or overlapped. We will use the relationship between UMT and advocacy groups to support the unemployed, especially in Rabat and Casablanca, where the headquarters of the UMT and the Democratic Confederation of Labour, Confederation Democratique du Travail (CDT), hosted meetings and conferences of the budding movement against unemployment.

The third and final section of this paper focuses on actors in the field of economic and social rights, specifically the right to work. It will look at the overlapping of social movements or actors supporting these rights and human rights organizations advocating them especially after the launch of the National Initiative for Human Development or Initiative Nationale pour le Developoment Humain (INDH) in 2006, which was designed to combat poverty and social vulnerability among social groups such as widows, people with disabilities, and young school dropouts, and to fund income-generating projects.

Section 1: Human rights and the students’ movement

The students’ movement has always been a breeding ground for the Moroccan political class, especially for the left that dominated opposition politics and controlled UNEM. During the 1960s, Moroccan students clashed repeatedly with security forces and fought amongst themselves. Student activism, however, declined by the 1990s and so did its rights-based drive and its political influence. However, the new educational reform laws in the early 2000s allowed student representation in college and university presidential councils. This section explores the context within which student action evolved in Morocco? How did it intersect with social and political action? And how did it relate to the human rights approach and actors?

Smoldering Years in Moroccan Universities A group of radical student movements which organized several strikes in universities and high schools around Morocco emerged in the early 1970s. Many students were arrested and detained by the government including UNEM president Mohammad Lakhasasi.
The 15th UNEM congress was held on 11 August 1972 in a tense atmosphere as relations with the government were rapidly deteriorating. The organization was banned on 24 January 1973, a ban that lasted for five years and severely diminished UNEM’s influence and exposed its supporters to divisions and conflicts that continued until the 16th congress, which was followed by deeper rifts among various leftist factions ending with the withdrawals of a number of members. The first to leave were students affiliated with the leftist National Union of Popular Forces (NUPF) in what seemed like a repetition of the 1959 split of the NUPF from the Independence party that was, to an extent, UNEM’s god father.

The Domination of the Radical Left  For UNEM, human rights were deployed as the umbrella of student rights such as housing, scholarships, transportation subsidies and employment opportunities after graduation. These corporatist demands, however, were also shaped by the politics of various student factions that belonged to the opposition or those who supported the democratic transition under the auspices of the Royal regime such as the Socialist Union of Popular Forces party.

The 17th national congress scheduled for 1981 was to be held in the midst of political and social turmoil due to a severe economic crisis that triggered public protests and strikes (port workers in Casablanca, Ahouali copper miners, railroad workers, student sit-ins and the farmers’ uprising in Tamara and Tassaltante). The regime responded with an iron hand leading to thousands of victims and detainees. UNEM’s internal ideological contradictions among various leftist factions exploded, ending with various withdrawals and leaving a radical leftist group known as Annahj Al Qaidi or Voie Democratique Basiste (VDB) in charge of UNEM, but not for long as Islamist students came into the scene in force.3

Newcomers: A New Cycle of Violence  Until the mid-1980s, Moroccan universities witnessed daily confrontations between security forces and radical leftist students, especially from the VDB. The ensuing political and security tension led to a crackdown on university students during which a large number of students were detained especially after the 1981 strike. By 1986, Moroccan universities had become significantly policed and ‘university guards’ became a permanent fixture on campuses. Meanwhile, radical leftists had to confront a new adversary, the Islamists, who, in turn, engaged in violent tactics.
Human rights and corporatist interests for students had receded from the agendas of these warring factions, especially given the wide intellectual and ideological chasm between leftists and Islamists regarding human rights. The politics of violence and exclusion dominated the relations among factions. Even more, accusations of treason and of serving external agendas reverberated even within factions. “University Trials” spread dramatically undermining the freedom of thought and belief among university students.⁴

Regional and Ethnic Dimensions in Student Action (2000-2015) Starting with the academic year 1998-1999, the presence of security forces and their raids quickly declined. The regular pursuits by university guards, who became increasingly useless, of the Justice and Charity group student members ceased. The university government-appointed guards were replaced by a private security firm in order to guarantee a minimum level of peace on campus. The activism of the Justice and Charity students declined after they developed their organizational structures and their preaching councils. The primary role of student activism lost its relative importance given the national political developments, nicknamed at the time as the Spring of Rights as the socialist opposition was called upon to form a cabinet in a new political deal called Consensual Rotation whereby political parties alternated in power.⁵

In Agadir, Marrakesh and, to a lesser extent, Rabat, Sahrawi students who come from southern provinces founded their own student organizations. They established weekly cultural events and called for more rights and entitlements related to transportation, financial assistance and housing. Sahrawi students reacted aggressively when they felt their freedom of assembly was curtailed. Violent confrontations between Sahrawi students and security forces occurred almost annually over their activities in support of the secessionist Polisario front.

In the early 2000s, radical leftist student re-organized in the northern cities of Tangier and Tetouan. Their new framework, the “Basist Path”, introduced a platform for dialogue with all progressive and leftist factions, but they all got mired in a new cycle of bloody violence later on.

The Justice and Charity faction, that had by then monopolized UNEM structures, had distanced itself from violent tactics. They organized “welcome weeks for new
students” on campuses, especially in Casablanca, Safi and Oujda, and tutoring sessions to assist and guide students in their education. They also acted as a channel with the administration on collective student demands, especially regarding the repercussions of university reform laws. They organized regular protests against the privatization of some specializations (as they did at the higher school of technology in Tangier in 2013-2014).

Section 2: trade unions and human rights

There is no evidence that there was a specific plan to establish a wider political democratic current within the UMT central organs. However, progressive activists within the UMT engaged in both trade union and human rights activism at the same time after years of experience showed the overlapping of the two fields and how they enrich each other. According to Amine, the original approach of the UMT democratic current was to work under the general slogan of “serving, not exploiting, the working class.” They focused on six main principles of union activism: unity (meaning the unity of trade unions’ work), solidarity, grassroot activism, democracy, independence and progressiveness. In parallel, the democratic current established several principles of rights activism through the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) since 1991 on the occasion of its third congress.

Outlining these principles was an important turning point in the AMDH evolution since they became the preamble of its basic laws in December 1991. These principles are:

Universality and comprehensiveness: This means a repudiation of the arguments of cultural relativism and particularities against the universality of human rights. Comprehensiveness means to respect the totality of human rights including economic, social, cultural and environmental rights alongside civil and political rights.

Grass-roots activism: This principle is largely unique to AMDH among other Arab human rights organizations. It meant AMDH had to pay attention to recruiting
membership and to ensuring public support.

Democracy: This principle was seen to include: 1- Respect of human rights can be only assured through a real democratic system, 2- Maintaining democratic relations with partners, and 3- Democratic practices rely on effective protection of human rights.

Independence: AMDH should operate independently from the state, political parties, foreign donors or any such external influences to ensure that its positions stem from its own principles.

Progressiveness: AMDH should be positioned alongside progressive forces, whether locally, nationally or internationally.

The main confrontation within the UMT took place between the ‘democratic front’ and the ‘bureaucratic line’ during the February 20 uprising. The UMT central bureau was divided between the two tendencies, where the former advocated active participation of the working class in the protests, while the latter wanted the UMT to stay neutral. This internal difference was resolved through a concession that offered the freedom of choice to UMT members. However, when the two sides differed soon thereafter on adopting a position on the work of a royal committee to amend the constitution, the ‘bureaucratic line’ won. Amine comments: “We had neither the experience nor the political will at the time, to clash with the Makhzen knowing fully well that they are capable of crushing us.”

The administrative committee of the UMT central bureau met on 20 June 2011, ten days before the scheduled referendum on the new constitution. A majority of committee members argued that the amendments provided for a “positive constitution which the central bureau helped shape.” The democratic front insisted on members’ individual freedom to choose: to vote for, against or to boycott. It referred to the fact that the UMT rejected the first postcolonial constitution in 1962, stayed neutral towards the amendments of 1970 and 1972, and left members free to vote their own minds on the constitutional amendments of 1992 and 1996.

The ‘bureaucratic line’ won this dispute, leading to a rupture between the UMT two dominant but antagonistic groups after having coexisted for a long time,
lasting even beyond the 20 February protests in which members of the ‘democratic front’ actively took part against the position of the bureaucratic line.\textsuperscript{11}

The differences regarding the constitutional amendments uncovered the unbridgeable chasm between the two groups dominating the UMT. Amine and his comrades were expelled from the UMT on 22 March 2012.\textsuperscript{12}

Section 3: the INDH and Demands for Economic and Social Rights

On its first day, the 20 February movement raised the slogan, “bread, freedom and social justice”. This slogan summarized the social ills afflicting Morocco, primarily the dramatic inequalities that severely hit various social strata who had previously enjoyed a ‘middle class’ status. They included civil servants, local administration employees, teachers and contractors. It also reflected concerns about civil and political rights and revived discussion on constitutional monarchy that had been seen by various political actors as a way out from an unchecked power held by the palace.

Days after the protests erupted, the King delivered a speech on 9 March, in an obvious attempt to contain the masses using a new discourse that included references to human rights and an integrated vision of political reform. The rights-based approach which framed the developmental politics of Morocco for more than a decade since the INDH launch had given roots to a new view of the function of political authorities – a view which was first revealed in King Mohamed VI’s accession speech in 1999. The king had then spoken about the importance of rule of law, judiciary independence, and effective attention to social and economic issues of interest to the majority of Moroccans. Development projects in neighbourhoods and villages and the increasing number and spreading activities of NGOs created a fertile ground to those interested in participating in development initiatives, especially at a local level. All these developmental and institutional efforts, which took place before 2011, dissuaded the revolutionary forces in Morocco from calling for the fall of the regime as happened in Tunisian and Egyptian protests, making them instead call for ‘reforms’ including the consolidation of freedoms and improving social services in Morocco.\textsuperscript{13}
Persistent social demands had a major influence on the new constitutional document. Articles 1 to 35 provided for a range of social, cultural and economic rights such as the right to education, health and employment as well as the right to a safe environment for future generations. They all targeted vulnerable social groups that suffer from discrimination and social exclusion especially in the geographical peripheries. These constitutional rights, however, remained “ink on paper” until research for this paper was completed in mid 2017 pending the enactment of legal and regulatory frameworks to reform policies and reallocate resources.

After the 20 February movement, waves of protests continued to reverberate throughout Morocco, reaching nearly 17,000 protests in 2017 and probably exceeding 30,000 protests over 2016 and 2017. Most protests focussed on socioeconomic rights such as housing, healthcare, education and employment.¹⁴

**Occupying the Street: How Moroccans Domesticated the Forbidden!** Even before the Arab uprisings swept North Africa in 2011, many Moroccans, especially within the more vulnerable communities, had come to embrace the social significance of two values: dignity and accountability. This was a side effect of years of work on the INDH programmes and projects since 2006. Specific historical circumstances made it possible to enshrine these two values, to test the state’s willingness and ability to respect and protect them as values and as practices, and, finally, to let the society scrutinize the seriousness and impact of major developmental projects and slogans.¹⁵

The Arab Spring dynamics still provided the opportunity for Moroccans to exercise previously largely restricted rights; assembly and protest, both of which the state had been very allergic to for decades. This meant protestors were more willing to take over public spaces and unite in the face of hitherto customary state violence and repression. The protest action evolved together with more organized social movements as structural transformations, deep and cosmetic, swept through Arab North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco) or led to the disintegration of the rigid Qaddafi regime in Libya.¹⁶

Public protests had long belonged to the realm of the forbidden in Morocco. State institutions and the people approached their presence in public spaces differently.
The state viewed any public assembly with deep suspicion and always worked to prevent it believing that it could undermine public order. The citizens, such as street vendors, started to view their occupation of public space as an earned right and a way to ensure their livelihood and secure their basic needs.

The death of Mohsen Fekry, a fish seller who was crushed to death in a garbage disposal truck, provided a vivid example of the gap between the state and the citizens in how they viewed public space as well as the contradiction between rights/legitimacy and legality when it comes to laws of the land. Mohsen jumped behind his fish catch in the truck after police officers ordered the garbage collectors to dispose of the “illegally caught” fish. The fisherman was ground to death together with his catch. Mohsen was probably driven not merely by impulsive protest but also by an attempt to reclaim his material rights, his source of livelihood and his income. The state representatives ordered the truck driver to operate the grinder to dispose of the fish in compliance with regulations for handling fish caught during forbidden times, determined in order to ensure the sustainability of the fishing areas. The result was a tragic and cruel scene that led to public outrage and continuous protests in Rif since then.

The state attempted to provide an alternative narrative on the circumstances of Mohsen’s death by highlighting punitive measures taken against coast guards and customs officer for not ensuring compliance with non-fishing rules during pre-determined times of mandatory biological rest.

The incident, however, exposed the wide gap between state and citizens, demonstrating that what citizens see as a contradiction between rights and laws could have tragic consequences. While laws have rationales that are largely based on a certain concept of public interest and the relative weights of social groups and their ability to alter legislations, they can be seen by a citizen as illegitimate as they impede an integral right. On the other hand, the tragic death of Mohsen embodied a public transition from a rhetorical phase of human rights advocacy to very concrete actions by non-politicized citizens. Economic and social rights are thus were transformed from tools in the discursive struggles of human rights and trade union activists to a popular and grass root movement when a common citizen decides to insist on them physically and pay for them, even with his own life and liberty, if must be.
The CDT as an Incubator of Protest

The Democratic Confederation of Labour or Confederation Democratique du Travail (CDT) was a prominent supporter of the 20 February protests. This became more evident after 13 March 2011, when national protests were harshly repressed, especially in Casablanca and Rabat where demonstrators were beaten up by the Rapid Intervention Forces of the ministry of interior. After this incident, the CDT headquarters in Derb Omar, in the heart of the modern city, became an assembly space for local coordinating bodies of the 20 February movement in Casablanca instead of the central headquarter of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) in Agadir which had embraced the movement when it was being established.\(^1^9\)

In explaining the reasons for which the well-established trade union embraced the Moroccan street protests, Abdelkader Zayer, CDT deputy general secretary, spoke about CDT ethos saying that the trade union was established in 1977 primarily to defend basic human rights, especially the rights of the working class, and the freedom of expression.\(^2^0\)

The CDT has long adopted the slogan: “Democracy is the solution” since it was set up in a tense regional and national environment where recurrent protests took place motivated by the economic and social repercussions of structural adjustment programmes and influences by the 1979 Iranian revolution. The CDT organized a general strike in 1981 to protest price hikes for certain basic goods and took part in protests in 1984 and in 1990. In a way, it was not a detour that CDT backed the 20 February movement politically and logistically.

The CDT was transformed from a vicious opponent of the government to a social partner after the political environment opened up and allowed a rotational system of power-sharing among political parties in 1998. Abderrahmane Youssoufi, the leader of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces at the time, became prime minister, and the CDT, whose founders were members and supporters of that party, tried to maintain independence. They repeatedly announced: “We are not a government’s union nor is the government a unions’ government.” It joined two strikes during Youssoufi’s term.

CDT leader Abdelilah Moharar insisted that the agreement of 26 April 2011 which brought together trade unions and the government was an unexpected “gift” from
the state. Wanting to secure workers support a couple of months before the significant referendum on the new constitution scheduled for 1 July 2011, the government agreed to raise salaries by 600 dirhams.\(^\text{21}\)

After the speech delivered by king Mohamed VI on 9 March 2011, in which the issue of the constitutional amendments was raised, the regime paid much attention to neutralizing the working class and securing its support or non-opposition in the imminent constitutional referendum. Amine argued that “the role played by the working class in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions” taught the Moroccan regime a lesson and enabled it to get away with making less concessions. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) played a leading role in the political transition as it sided with the protests and managed to convince the state bureaucracy that had been loyal to Ben Ali to change sides.”\(^\text{22}\)

Commenting on CDT support for the 20 February movement, Zayer said: “After the April 26 agreement, the state started to prepare new faces for ruling the country … the King was quick to declare that the winning party in the elections is the one to form the government. The CDT worked well within the 20 February movement. but the movement suffered from internal contradictions. The winds of the Arab Spring brought the [Islamist] Justice and Development Party (PJD) to power and this party helped abort the revolutionary movement. Although there are many social movements in Morocco, they remain incapable of realizing their goals in the face of state power.”\(^\text{23}\)

**The Unemployed Movement Fails to Integrate** The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) stipulates that state parties recognize the “right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right.” It further advised states on steps to be taken to gradually ensure this right including “technical and vocational guidance and training programmes, policies and techniques to achieve steady economic, social and cultural development and full and productive employment under conditions safeguarding fundamental political and economic freedoms to the individual.”\(^\text{24}\)

The protests of the unemployed emerged in Morocco as a direct result of structural adjustment programs and consequent austerity measures since the late 1980s.
The state had gradually withdrawn from social services and especially from the job creation functions moving towards a narrower public social and economic role in line with the neoliberal paradigms. The Moroccan state shifted from being, even if ostensibly, a ‘welfare state’ to a liberal state, economically speaking, that is based on ‘free enterprise’ and full integration in the global market economy after the agreement to establish the World Trade Organization was signed in Marrakech in 1994. This, for example, quickly impacted the number of available government jobs. For example, the number of jobs in the public education sector fell from 35,000, throughout the 1970s to only 8,000 in the last decade, pushing thousands of the unemployed and newly graduates to the street to protest and demand their right to work.25

The first foundational gathering for an organization for the unemployed Moroccans was held in late 1980 at the CDT headquarters at Derb Omar, Casablanca. It led to the establishment of the National Association of Unemployed Graduates in Morocco (NAUGM). The fledgling entity then began to set up local branches all over Morocco, accepting members regardless of professional qualifications or specializations. NAUGM activists, assisted by the CDT and supported by the UMT, took part in protests, mostly in Rabat Parliament square. In addition to almost daily protests in the capital city, some NAUGM members took part in local protests. Local administrative bodies led by the Ministry of Interior and its local representatives led the government side in negotiations with these latter protesters. This oftentimes led to the later employment of some of these protesters in the Ministry of Interior and its local units throughout the country.

The AMDH adopted the demands of the unemployed and provided a platform to their provincial and sub-provincial branches. One of AMDH provincial leaders said: “To support the unemployed and the street vendors, the AMDH in Oued Zem was very engaged in their struggle. It raised their awareness by organizing seminars and meetings about the right to work including a meeting at the CDT. It expressed its direct support during their protests and by intervening with the relevant authorities to look into cases and problems of employment. Locally, the AMDH issued solidarity statements to support the unemployed and street vendors in their struggle against arbitrary security measures. It contributed to strengthening local activist networks such as the My Right to Work movement and the Local
The Association of the Unemployed and its local branches was influenced by the AMDH and a disproportionate presence of radical leftist activists in its steering committees. Activists within the ranks of the unemployed tended to form other organizational platforms as of 2003. These included the Unemployed Graduates Group which together with other similar organizations took a corporatist approach to their cause in isolation of leftist or Islamist ‘ideological’ influences that had often characterized the activism of the Moroccan Association of the Unemployed until then.

The activism of these new groups was solely directed towards demanding the right to work. They established the National Agency to Support Unemployed Graduates (NASUG) in which several national media and civil society activists participated such as journalist Khaled Jamai, rights activists Malika Fatemi and Abdelkader Azria, and others. Other political parties and activists joined the unemployed movement and attempted to gain support for their own outfits. The National Initiative to Support the Unemployed was an attempt to prevent the recruitment of unemployed graduates by the opposition Justice and Charity group as well as by the PJD youth.

Prime Minister, Driss Jettou’s cabinet (2002-2007) was amenable to NASUG’s work. More than 1,226 unemployed graduates signed up with NASUG. Its task of finding jobs for the unemployed in the public sector was not easy, with its negotiation sessions with the state sometimes reaching a dead-end before it succeeded in assigning some of these unemployed graduates to vacancies in the ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, and Higher Education.

The ‘Opportunism’ of the Unemployed The movement of the unemployed enjoyed a remarkable revival within the 20 February movement after overcoming the organizational near monopoly of the radical left on the unemployed activism. This radical left was represented by the Democratic Way Party and some Marxist currents (Leninist, Maoist, and Trotskyist). After an agreement with the government, negotiations continued between the
NASUG, the authorities and other parties and social actors such as the Islamist Justice and Charity group and the Islamist Unification and Reform Movement, working especially with unemployed graduates. Unemployed advocacy groups seemed rather opportunistic in the eyes of several activists in the 20 February movement as they appeared unable to integrate their demands within the broader positions of the movement, limiting their advocacy to the right to work.

The unemployed advocacy groups stayed removed from the 20 February movement and its political demand for a constitutional monarchy or its socio-economic demands for dignity and social justice. The unemployed groups failed to create allies despite the support they received from trade unions and human rights activists. Their broad ideological contradictions and pragmatism drove their trade union and human rights’ allies to take a distance from them. Amine described this with precision saying: “to sum it up, they truly exhausted us. They stood alongside the 20 February movement during protests. And yet, they continued to insist only on the right to work.”

Despite all of this, the movement of the unemployed continued to exist on the public scene. However, it often appeared as an ‘uncontrolled’ social movement because of its escalation of activism and viewing the right to work as already an ‘earned right.’ This was evident in collective protests and hunger strikes that they carried out under the slogan of the battle of ‘empty stomachs’. Azria believed that the intensity and opportunism of the unemployed movement highlighted a pirate’s attitude to political opportunities, which became available as the political regime addressed the occupiers of public spaces after the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011. The ruling regime adopted a lenient position regarding unstructured and informal labour and commerce and fast responded to social demands related to the right to work and to securing income-generating activities. For this, the state was forced to provide huge budgets in order to develop the employment sector. Despite the public pressure, the INDH projects proved effective in helping overcome the social tensions at the time given its accumulated achievements in marginal areas where it implemented various programs.

However, these new budgetary allocations and policy reforms collided with the deep-rooted transformation in Morocco from a welfare state to a neoliberal one that had abandoned many of its functions as a provider and regulator of social
services, which significantly reduced the number of available job opportunities, especially in state institutions, in comparison to the number of job seekers. This dilemma was further compounded by increasing automation and the weak competitiveness of the Moroccan economy.

**Conclusion**

Morocco has enjoyed an exceptional human rights movement with accumulated achievements compared to other countries in its North African Arab environment. This was made possible thanks partly to the continuous struggles of human rights organizations and activists. The country has made relatively great progress in the field of civil and political rights since the late 1990s: it criminalized all forms of torture, removed reservations on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and amended criminal procedures law to ensure due process and fair trials. Moreover, the state created higher agencies and councils as well as a ministry for human rights including the National Council for Human Rights in accordance with the Paris principles relating to the Status and Functioning of National Institutions for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights. Morocco witnessed its own spring of political and civil rights with the transfer of power from King Hassan II to King Mohamed VI in 1999. However, the terror attacks of May 2003 in Casablanca, as well as the government’s response to these attacks, returned a large sector of the rights movement to square one.

Morocco political actors have suffered setbacks in the path of democratic transition as the state entered intermittent confrontations with mushrooming protest movements for social and economic rights in the north and south eastern parts of the country centred around demands for the redistribution of wealth and power.

However, the deeper and broader national transformation started to take root a decade ago as bridges started to appear over the gap between an alleged elitism of the human rights movement and the “masses”, especially after the 20 February movement. This was evident in how human rights organizations refocussed attention on social, economic and localized causes with various communities and social groups such as students, workers or the unemployed. As it evolves along
these bridges, the rights actors collide as is happening in other similar countries in the region with existing economic and political arrangements and especially the entrenched political economic patronage networks. This will be their challenge for years to come.
Endnotes

1. Early signs of Morocco’s human rights movement can be detected in constitutional drafts before the French and Spanish protection agreements of 1912 such as the reform memorandum of Hajj Ali Zniber in 1906 and the draft constitution of 1908. For more information see EzzEdine Shamal, “First Signs of Morocco Constitutional Movement”, Uloum Qanonniya, 24 October 2012, available in Arabic at [bit.ly](https://bit.ly/).


3. Interview with professor Mohamed Hamza, a former student activist and a member of the political office of Unified Socialist Left Party, 5 April 2017. UNEM internal division were largely among leftist factions led by the Democratic Faction (controlled by Annahj Al Qaidi or Voie Democratique Basiste (VDB)comprising activists from the March 23 movement and the Forward (Ila al-Amam) organization. SUPF students withdrew in rejection of the leadership positions of the Martyrs’ current while the Popular Democratic Action Organization and the Party of Progress and Socialism both withdrew, probably due to their failure to wrestle control over the congress from the democratic faction (led by VDB). Hamza thinks that the withdrawal of these factions, which he called “the bureaucratic wing”, was presaged by the June 1981 uprising and the desire not to support it as this wing had reached a deal with the regime that required “social peace”.

4. Two radical left university students were killed after a “university trials” that charged them with “atheism and heresy” in Fez and Oujda. A third student, affiliated with the Justice and Charity group, was killed in the same period by the Rapid Intervention Forces at the Faculty of Medicine in Casablanca. For more information, see: Shohdaa wa Shaheedat blog, 28 November 2015, available in Arabic at [bit.ly](https://bit.ly/) and Nidalalt Al Haraka At-Tollabiyya, “An Introductory Note of Martyer Mohammad Ait-Algeed Beneissa”, 28 February 2013, available in Arabic at [bit.ly](https://bit.ly/).


6. The university reform law was applied in the academic year 2003-2004 to re-organize post graduate studies (for Masters and PhD degrees). The “improvised” implementation of the law led to several problems and directly contributed to a decline in the quality of postgraduate programmes. As a result, far less university graduates pursued higher studies, preferring professional training to avoid years of hard work without a reasonable assurance of social or economic rewards.

7. In 2013-2014, the author of this paper edited a university supplement for Al-Masaa newspaper distributed exclusively in campuses at a preferential price of 1.5 Dirhams. This allowed for a detailed follow up of university life throughout Morocco.

8. Interview with Abdelhamid Amine, a trade unions’ leader and former AMDH chairperson, 6 October 2016.

9. Makhzen (warehouse) is a term used in Morocco to refer to the ruling economic and security institutions clustered around the monarchy.

10. In 1965, late King Hassan II announced a state of exception and dissolved parliament. He and his regime survived two coup d’états in 1970 and 1972.


12. The group included Abdelhamid Amine, Abderrazak IdriSSI, Khadija Jamri and Abdallah al-Fanatsa. A UMT leader claimed that the ruling regime had ordered their expulsion and that it was also the same regime that ordered their return later on after it had weakened them within the AMDH, the Democratic Way party and inside the union itself. For more on this narrative, see Yanairi, “The Truth of Abdel Hamid Amine’s Return to the UMT and the Expulsion of Farouk Shehir”, 25 April 2016, available in Arabic at [bit.ly](https://bit.ly).
Interviews with Moustafa Yahiaoui, Political Sociology Professor and an INDH expert, 8 and 23 November 2016.

Hisham A’naji, “Press Review: 600 Complaints against Judges and 17,000 Protests in 2017”, Lakome, 26 December 2017, available in Arabic at lakome2.com

Yahiaoui interviews.

Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel (eds.), *Social movement mobilization and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, California University Press. 2013 p. 20


On CDT support, see an Arabic timeline of the 20 February movement activities at bit.ly

Interview with Abdel Qader Al-Zayer, CDT first deputy Secretary General, 5 November 2016.

Under this agreement, the government agreed to a raise of 600 Dirhams in the monthly salaries of civil servants starting 1 May 2011, as well as raising the minimum pension from 600 to 1000 Dirhams. For more information, see: banisalman.dahek.net

Interview with Amine.

Interview with Zayer.

See the full ICESCR text at ohchr.org

Mohammed Abou Hatab, “The Impact of Structural Adjustment on Morocco’s Employment Policies”, Uloum Qanoniya site, 8 April 2013, available in Arabic at bit.ly

Interview with Ahmed Al Serbouti, AMDH branch director at Oued Zem, east of Casablanca, 3 November 2016.

Interview with Abdel Qader Azria, a trade unions expert and the head of the local branch of the National Council of Human Rights in Rabat-Qnietra, 22 December 2016.

“In its Fifth Anniversary: The Slogans of 20 February Movement Lose Value for the Unemployed and Professors”, Zankat 20, 20 February 2016, available in Arabic at bit.ly


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