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Transcending Boundaries: Moroccan Political Thought as a Transnational Platform, and Communities in the Realm of Activism

Leah Siegel

School of International Training Morocco: Migration and Transnational Identity
Professor Souad Eddouada
Advisor: Dr. Driss Maghraoui
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Abstract

My research concerns how individual protestors of the February 20th Movement relate to the rest of the Arab Spring and their own society. I conducted several interviews during November 2012 with participants of the movement currently living in Rabat, each one lasting between 30 minutes to two hours. I initially intended this study to focus on the movement’s relations to the rest of the Arab Spring, but found in my interviews that this question is much more tangential than the question of how participants of the movement relate to their own society. What I discovered was that while the events of the Arab Spring were instrumental in initiating the movement, the intranational perception of the movement, propagated by the movement and the media, was much more salient in the outcomes and the state of the movement today. The February 20th Movement, described by some analysts as a branch of a global phenomenon, an unremarkable footnote to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi and the protests of Tahrir Square, is therefore more effectively analyzed in light of these national forces, in addition to the international Arab Spring phenomenon. This is important to keep in mind when discussing the future of activism in Morocco. While the February 20th Movement is no longer as active as it once was (at least, as of writing this paper), political dialogue between the state of Morocco and its people is far from over.
Introduction

In 2011, *Time* Magazine bequeathed its annual honorary title of “Person of the Year” to The Protestor. This wasn’t the first time that the award was given to a non-specific individual: starting with “The American fighting-man” in 1950, the magazine has given the title to a group of individuals a total of ten times (and has also given the title of “Planet of the Year” to Earth in 1988 and “Machine of the Year” to the computer in 1982).

Honoring a group, not specific individuals, and not even a specific movement from 2011, indicates a judgment by *Time* that all of these protests can be lumped together, despite “the stakes [being] very different in different places.” And, indeed, there seemed to be an increased interest and awareness of different global movements among the general public; at least much more so than in recent years. From the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to Occupy Wall Street in America, there appeared to be an international wave of discontent with those in power that was shaking established governments and institutions, and an accompanying will to work for change.

In my research, I have attempted to focus on one group amongst the many that were active in 2011: the February 20th Movement of Morocco. The sociopolitical situation in Morocco is anything but simple. The more I read in preliminary research, the more overwhelmed I felt with the task of understanding. It would be impossible for me to adequately explain the factors leading up to the February 20th Movement: this information could fill volumes of books. To do it justice, one would have to look back into Morocco’s past: independence from France, the restoration of the Moroccan monarchy, and the reigns of Mohamed V, Hassan II, and Mohamed VI. And attempting to understand how the movement fits in within global current events could take up a whole shelf. Instead, I
intend to hold a microscope up to the movement: to focus, not on how the Arab Spring related to these protestors, but on how these protestors related to the Arab Spring.

Even with this narrow scope, it is important to have a general grasp of what happened in Morocco during the winter and spring of 2011. I will attempt to give a concise summary of events in the following sections.

**Putting It All in Context: The February 20th Movement and Moroccan Activism**

The February 20th Movement, named for the day it was started in 2011 while the world was tuned into the streets of Tunisia and Egypt, was launched by a group of young Moroccans calling for sociopolitical and economic change. On February 3rd, the Facebook group called “Freedom and Democracy Now” announced February 20th as a “Day of Dignity,” and as many as 300,000 Moroccans took to the streets. The incredible turnout of unhappy citizens, and the number of demonstrations on different days throughout February, caused King Mohamed VI to announce the unveiling of eventual reforms to the country’s constitution. These reforms were to cede some power of which the monarchy had a monopoly, but when they were revealed on June 17th, members of the movement proclaimed the changes to be superficial in nature.ii

Leaders of the movement heavily used the Internet to publicize the demonstrations. In the first video put out on February 16, 2011, several Moroccans listed their reasons for taking to the streets:

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th because I want a free and equal Morocco for all Moroccans
- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so that all Moroccans will be equal.

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so I can get a job without bribing

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so education will be accessible for everyone, not only the rich

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so people can get medical care for free without connections

- I am protesting February 20th so that I can learn (read and write) Tamazight

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so labor rights will be respected and to put an end to exploitation

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th because I want freedom and jobs in this country

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th people do not have to live in the slums anymore

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so that police will no longer take advantage of me

- I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20th so I can battle corruption in my country
-I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20\textsuperscript{th} so we can hold accountable those who ruined this country

-I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20\textsuperscript{th} because we want a popular and democratic constitution

-I am Moroccan and I am joining the protest February the 20\textsuperscript{th}. I will protest more than that! Because food prices are too high and I am suffering from that. When I go out and join a peaceful demonstration to object against food prices I am met with violence. I don’t know how it can be that I am being oppressed in my own country! When I go out and join a peaceful demonstration I get beaten up. The oppressive forces are oppressing me. I am being crushed by high food prices and poverty, and on top of that I am oppressed... This is too much!

Only a couple of days later, the same Youtube account released another video in a question-and-answer format. The tone was a mixture of conversational and factual:

-Who are we? We are the young people of Morocco. We love this country, and are calling out for change and dignity.

-Why are we protesting? It is because we want a lot of things to change in this country. We do not want to be despised. We want those who loot our wealth to be punished. We want to go out and say, “Stop the looting! Stop the corruption!”

-What do we want? We want a democratic constitution, and an end to impunity of officials who abuse power and who benefit from the wealth of this country. We want a government that serves our interests and a parliament that represents us.
-And the rumors? The rumors that say that the peaceful protests are cancelled are untrue. We, the youth of the February 20th, are determined, and we are going to demonstrate!

-How did we start? There were always protests in Morocco, but the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt gave the young people and the old people of Morocco hope.

-Who is supporting us? All of you should know that no political party is behind us. We are young people and our only concern is the change and the demands of the Moroccan people.

-And the detentions? We are not afraid of beatings, and political detentions do not scare us. On the contrary, it gives us strength and credibility. iv

The movement is far from being the only active rallying cry for change in Morocco. v On any given day, one is likely to find protestors gathering in the squares neighboring the centrally located Parliament building in Rabat. Protests often concern the high unemployment rate of the young and educated, but voices are also raised against the extreme disparity of wealth among Moroccans, sexual harassment, and other such issues. Within my stay in Morocco, I have also witnessed Moroccans engaged in transnational activism, like in rallying in support of Palestine during the violence committed by the Israeli government along the Gaza Strip in November 2012, or when a crowd in Casablanca voiced their anger of the Islamophobia present in the film “The Innocence of Islam” in September 2012. Demonstrations of both transnational and domestic nature range from calm to exhilarating to terrifying. The most peaceful of demonstrations involve protestors sitting in front of Parliament with signs listing their grievances. The presence of the
Moroccan police in these situations is more perfunctory than anything, with members of the force simply overseeing the demonstration. Quite often, however, there is interaction between the protestors and the police that goes beyond an exchange of words: in these cases, there is a call-and-response dynamic in which protesters call out, and the police respond with violence. I have seen crowds surrounding a policeman clubbing a man. I have seen the police single out a woman and push her down. I’ve heard stories of things much worse; yet the art of protest is alive and well in Morocco, despite the threat of violence.

*Morocco and the Arab Spring*

Due to a number of factors, including its timing, and the geographical location of and the presence of Islam in Morocco, the February 20th Movement tends to be lumped together with the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring of 2011 has put this corner of the globe in the spotlight. It drew attention because it was a reminder of the agency of ordinary citizens when they work collectively. The protests have introduced an element of dynamism into the political world, which has long been singularly dominated by those already in power. Much of this is thanks to the recent advances in social networking, which have facilitated interaction between individuals from different countries. Indeed, during the period of the most activity for the February 20th Movement, the creation of new Facebook profiles jumped a total of 590,360, a 29.23% growth. This was the fourth highest number of new users in the MENA region at the time. More broadly, numbers in the MENA region went up significantly: from 14,792,972 users in April 2010 to 27,711,503 in April 2011—an increase of almost 200%. 
At the same time, the situation in Morocco is unique. I feel like this can be best illustrated in an interaction I had while talking about my research with a Moroccan friend. I told him that I was studying the February 20th Movement and its relation to the Arab Spring, and he said, “Ah? The Arab Spring? Do you know why I think this term is not correct?” I said no, and asked him to explain. “In Morocco,” he replied, “we are not all Arab. We are Amazigh, also. When you say ‘Arab Spring,’ you are not including the Amazigh.” I was struck by his comment, because from the start of my research, I had taken for granted the term “Arab Spring.” But he is right: Morocco is not simply Arab. The protests that took place in February 2011 did not only concern “Arab” issues. They were fighting corruption in a popular government while they were fighting for the recognition of the Amazigh identity.

The movie “My Makhzen and Me,” an independent film made by a Moroccan studying in America and put out on the website Vimeo, introduced me to the February 20th Movement. Previous to my time in Morocco, I had no cognizance of any major demonstrations happening at the time, despite having paid attention to the developments of the Arab Spring in other countries. (When I mentioned this to one of my respondents, she laughed and said called my ignorance “normal.”) Later I was told that the Arab Spring had bypassed Morocco, and that its citizens were content with their king, and I found no reason to find out if this was true. This is no small wonder: compared to the attention-grabbing headlines concerning Tunisia and Tahrir Square that graced the covers of newspapers, Morocco’s movement, skillfully quelled by King Mohamed VI, was not a major player on the world stage at the time.
Organization of This Paper

In the next section, I will break down what many authors are saying about the state of both the Arab Spring and the February 20th Movement. From there, I will discuss how I conducted field research. I will then present my interviews in "Findings," breaking up information by the topic of discussion. I will then analyze these interviews in the Conclusion. To end, I will mention the limitations of my studies and how my research can aid future research.

Review of the Literature

In my preliminary research, I looked largely for information specifically on the February 20th Movement and the Arab Spring. However, it was important to have a basic understanding of the frameworks concerning social movements. Donatella della Porta, in her "Eventful Protest, Global Conflicts," has conducted an excellent study on the psychology of a social movement, or, as she puts it, the "emergent character of protest itself." By comparing protests across the world, she looks at the social dimension of social movements, at what factors contribute to building a strong and unified identity. She asserts that demonstrating, or "direct action," is necessary for both the inner workings and the outside reputation of a movement—not just for "increased visibility" in the public, but also "the strengthening of motivation through the development of feelings of solidarity and belonging." In dramaturgical terms, direct action allows for a louder message onstage, while rallying the troops backstage.

She views transnational movements as a platform for more intricate social interactions than standard direct action. She calls this platform a "social forum" that
reflects a conception of the movement as an arena where different groups and individuals communicate with each other. Additionally, relational mechanisms are particularly relevant given the transnational nature of protest events. “While she refers to transnational movements that are much more united than the Arab Spring, such as the international organization Greenpeace, her analysis of the movement serving as a forum for the exchange of ideas still holds.

Della Porta says that the presence of a counter-force, such as the police, works to, in fact, unite a movement. This force frequently "produces the spread of injustice frames... often mentioned by protesters as a source of consensus within the community and the strengthening of a collective identification with it." Specifically when police are present, "the risk of arrest testifies to the conviction that something had to be done about a decision considered profoundly unjust, even if this involved running very serious costs indeed." Emotion accompanies the feeling of injustice: "La colère is also mentioned by those marching against unemployment... What makes anger a mobilizing emotion is its connection with a feeling of empowerment, that comes from the experiences of successful moments of direct action." To continue with her thinking, when there is a dearth of successful moments during direct action, the movement may experience a feeling of impotency. This in turn can prove to discourage members of a movement, and may ultimately lead to an altogether halt in any observable activity. One could argue that this is what happened to the February 20th Movement, that the lack of progress frustrated the protestors to a point of unsatisfied dormancy.

In fact, Allison L. McManus makes this exact point in her article on the liberal Arab news site, Jadaliyya. She focuses on the relations between February 20th and the rest of
Morocco in her article, “‘Arab Spring,’ Moroccan Winter.” “Given the evidence of the failure of this political solution,” she says in regards to the February 20th protestors not achieving the parliamentary monarchy they had desired,

why then are the protests drawing fewer numbers now than they had eighteen months ago? The unpopularity of protest must be considered in the context of fear. This begins with the first analyses in the media and in the academic realm of the 20 February protests and the oft used label of ‘movement.’ This is a label which was never sought by the activists who organized the first demonstrations and one which begs a decision: either stand with the ‘movement’ or against it. In fact, the purpose of the protests was to raise awareness and to declare a population who was against the social ills that result from corruption and repression. By using this label, rather than focusing on grievances that are relatable to the average Moroccan, the demonstrations are encapsulated as a symbol of resistance against the king and current government, a stance that is too dangerous for most. This dangerous position is reinforced by the highly publicized arrests and imprisonment of protest organizers and sympathizers.xv

In this case, she argues, some of the perceived unity of the “movement” might have hindered protestors in their efforts. It allowed individuals outside of the protests to box in the demonstrations and label them as antagonistic to the monarchy, thus creating a rift between protestors and the general public. Without the support of the public, the energy behind the protestors was soon drained.
McManus acknowledges that it is not the responsibility of the media to create sympathy for a group such as the February 20th protestors, but maintains that they are guilty of biased reporting:

While it is not the role of the media or academic community to support a protest movement, the one-dimensional portrayal of the protests neglects the full truth of the political economy in Morocco. This suppression of information has not changed with the new constitution, and perpetuates a fear of bringing to light the true endemic nature of corruption. Rather than exposing the truth, the international community has been presented a palatable account of a benign Moroccan version of the “Arab Spring,” while at the same time, giving Moroccans enough of a reason to stay home and despair.xvi

The media was therefore successful in cutting the protestors off from the sympathies of their fellow Moroccans, as well as from the attentions of the international community. This contributed to the dwindling numbers involved in direct action.

Samia Errazzouki agrees that the individuals behind the February 20th Movement were the victims of a false image that they had not created—that “the movement was forced to conform to the discourse framed by the regime.” Navigating the waters of publicity and reputation proved tricky in Morocco: “in a country where a majority of the population supports the monarchy and believes it is an institution that is entitled to the vast amount of wealth it has accrued at the expense of the people, the movement had to succeed in expressing their grievances without alienating themselves by targeting the monarchy.”xvii The discrediting of the February 20th Movement supported the idea of
“Moroccan exceptionalism” that “treats Morocco as so unique that standard methodological tools used to analyze the rest of the region are mostly dismissed.”

Even without the aid of the media, and despite its loss of energy since 2011, Thierry Desrues points out how the movement has succeeded in changing the dynamics of Moroccan social interaction and political discourse in his “Moroccan Youth and the Forming of a New Generation: Social Change, Collective Action and Political Activism.” He lists the accomplishments that we should not overlook, including “unblock[ing] reforms that had languished for years on the political and media agenda[,] [t]he participation of members of youth organizations from the different political parties in this movement [demonstrating] the failure of the main political parties[,] [t]he agenda of demands [making clear] that young people aspire to democracy, freedom, well-being and social justice[,]...bridg[ing] the ideological distances by establishing a dialogue among secular, Islamist, leftist and Amazigh sectors;” and the development of “[a]n on-line press” that has been “promoted by various writers who have been forced to withdraw from printed journalism in recent years,” allowing the “debates [to reach] the whole of society.” In short, he argues that the movement has opened the door to future reforms. Today’s conditions, as a result of yesterday’s actions, allow for tomorrow’s sociopolitical change.

Hamid Dabashi provides one last perspective on which we should consider when viewing the February 20th Movement and, more broadly, the Arab Spring. “It was not merely as ‘Arabs’ that Tunisians rose against tyranny,” he writes, “It was not merely as ‘Arabs’ that Egyptians have revolted against corrupt government. Rather, it was as citizens of betrayed republics, which had denied them since the end of European colonialism, that Tunisians and Egyptians, Yemenis and others in the region rose up against the tyrants who
ruled them—and against the US and European interests that kept those tyrants in power against their peoples’ will.” He eloquently reminds us that, in addition to the movements creating unique identities for the protestors, they also affirmed a humanistic idealism.

**Methods**

I entered the research process with the original intention of studying just the transnational dimension of activism in Morocco and the MENA region. But as I read more, I soon grew uncomfortable with the thought of lumping the February 20th Movement within the mammoth that is the Arab Spring.

My goal in my research was thus to obtain information that was much more personal than simply studying the movement. I wanted to get an understanding of how these individuals related their activism to their own society, as well as to the larger phenomenon of the Arab Spring. I therefore decided to organize in-depth interviews with several people who were somehow involved with the February 20th Movement. I attempted to get a diverse sample, even though I would be limited to protestors who lived in Rabat.

I was lucky enough to get in touch with Mohamed, who not only was my first interview, but someone who proved to be a wealth of information and contacts. He was able to connect me with several leaders of the February 20th Movement. I am indebted to his enthusiasm and perspective, which was both slightly removed yet sympathetic to the movement.

With the exception of one respondent who sent her answers through e-mail, I collected information through one-on-one interviews with individuals involved with the
February 20th Movement. The majority of these interviews lasted anywhere between 30 minutes to 2 hours. They were conducted in a mixture of English and French, and were, for the most part, tape recorded and later transcribed. The respondent and I would meet in a café, where I would first thank them for their time and inform them that their participation was completely voluntary. I also told them that their identity would be kept anonymous, and that when referencing them, I would give them an alias. I would then tell them a bit about myself: that I am a student of sociology, and that I had spent the past few months studying Arabic and Moroccan society. From there, I informed them of what I was hoping to study, and that I was looking to develop a more personal image of the movement than strictly a factual retelling. I then would jump into the interview questions, of which I had prepared a standardized set. However, I tried to remain flexible in our discussion.

After the interview, I would again thank the respondent for meeting me. To express my gratitude, I would pay for any of the drinks ordered. Before leaving, I’d ask if the participant if they knew anyone else who would be willing to be interviewed. This question often yielded one or two more names, and of these names, typically one would be available and willing to talk.

With my knowledge of French, I was able to conduct these interviews without the help of a translator. All of my respondents spoke at least a little bit of English in addition to French, so in times when the participant did not know a word in English, I was able to help out. Most conversations were conducted primarily in English, except for my interview with Othmane, who felt more comfortable answering my questions in French. I did encounter some trouble speaking with him; aside from some translating difficulties, he also spoke quietly, and I found myself asking him to repeat an answer several times.
In addition to the interviews, I had also wanted to observe the movement. Unfortunately, due to its relative inactivity since 2011, I was unable to observe members in action and on the street. One of the activists with whom I was in touch offered to bring me to one of the weekly meetings, but later had to cancel because he was busy studying for upcoming final exams. However, I heard that these meetings are now poorly attended and conducted in Arabic, so it is possible (and quite probable) that my attendance would not have been helpful in my research.

Researching a movement retrospectively also makes observing the movement on the street much more difficult: aside from one day per month that the movement demonstrates regarding a specific topic, they are not on the streets as a unified presence. I still wanted to get a sense of what it must have been like, so I also spent time observing a variety of protests that took place in the capital. While these sessions of observation helped me gain a small idea of what the feelings on the street must have been like, in no way were they comparable to the size and scope of the demonstrations that took place in 2011.

Findings

Below are segments and summaries of the interviews I had with my respondents. For the sake of cohesion, quotations are not necessarily taken from chronological order in the actual discussion. I left what they said largely unedited, except for in cases when clarification was needed. When a respondent used a French word, I wrote in the English equivalent. Because Amine’s answers were mostly in French, I did my best to translate what he said while remaining true to the spirit of his responses.
Profiles of Respondents

The individuals with whom I sat down were all involved, in some sense, with the February 20th Movement. Aside from this similarity, their situations and political beliefs varied. While most of them are students, Mohamed is in his 40s and works for one of Morocco’s ministries. Although he is a member of an Islamist party (the PJD), he describes himself as liberally minded. It was easy to get him talking, and his responses were often very philosophical in nature.

Rania is a student of biology and environmental sciences at Mohamed V University in Rabat. Her interests, however, are not limited to the natural sciences. After our discussion, she told me of her latest project: making a documentary on a man who was a political prisoner during the French occupation, but now is forgotten by the Moroccan government, the very institution he was fighting for in the 1950s. When I asked her what she planned to do in the future with her wide variety of interests, she said she didn’t know. “Maybe you could work in one of the ministries,” I suggested, plotting her potential future that combined science and politics, either in the Ministry of Health or Morocco’s Ministry of Energy and Mining. To that, she laughed, “You really think that the government would hire me?”

Karima is a student at the University in Kenitra. She studies English, and she is from Rabat. During my period of research, she could not make it to Rabat for an interview because she was busy with final examination preparation, so all of her responses were sent over e-mail.
Driss is a young freelance journalist who has worked with *Telquel*, the one prominent Moroccan journal that is more critical of the government than others, but he has also done independent activism work. When I sat down with him, he mentioned how he was currently focusing on the launch of his new website for critical journalism. He got his start in journalism working as the “morning guy” of an economics radio show, after studying sociology and economics at his university. He describes himself, as well as his family, as non-religious, even atheist: something that is rare in Morocco.

Soukaina is a student of economics at Mohamed V University. She plans to get a master’s degree in sociology upon finishing her program. Of all of people I talked with, she was the one who seemed to remain the most active in the February 20th Movement. She told me that she attends the weekly meetings as often as she can, and she plays a key role in planning the monthly demonstrations.

*How They Got Involved*

All of my respondents were politically engaged before 2011. Some of them were members of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH), which worked with the February 20th Movement. Others grew up in families with a history of political activism. Rania’s story is a particularly touching example of this. I found that the more outspoken of my respondents, Rania and Driss, were raised in families of political opposition.

Mohamed was politically active in college. He joined the Islamist movement, and is now a member of the Party for Justice and Development, the political party that rose to power in the 2011 elections. His connections in Morocco’s political world extend all the way up to the prime minister. (After our interview and as we were about to part ways, he
shook hands with a man he ran into on the street. He then turned to me and said, "That's the prime minister's son. I've known him since he was a primary school student.") When the protests started in February 2011, his interest was piqued. But he didn’t “have any friends in the movement" when it started. He thus took the initiative to meet the protestors, many of whom to which I was introduced.

Rania was raised in a family of political opposition. Her father was imprisoned during Morocco's *les années de plomb*, a period during Hassan II’s reign known for its oppressive conditions, and the disappearance of Moroccans who were outspoken against the government. She describes political prisoners as her heroes, and as her inspiration for her political activism. ("Eighteen of my friends are still in prison," she told me. “They are political prisoners. They are my heroes.") She spoke of her thoughts during the winter of 2011: “I was involved with Amnesty International before the movement, and when the revolutions started in Tunisia and Egypt, I really wished for a movement in Morocco. I was waiting for something like this, because I was hearing the stories of my father, what happened during those years, and what he was doing, and I hoped I can do something like him.” She was thus active with the February 20th Movement from the start; it was her idea to put out the first informative video, calling it very “unplanned.”

Karima said, “Before the start of the movement, I was (and still [am]) an activist of human rights, and also a political militant, so when the debate about the movement started in December 2010, I was there, with all other militants, and I got involved because I believe in all the claims of the movement.”

Driss was with the movement from the beginning. “I was a founding member of the February 20th Movement,” he says, “as well as movements that [preceded] the [February
20th] movement. The February 20th Movement was just a gathering of a lot of movements and social waves in Morocco, and many ideological parties and organizations that were working in Morocco, in the streets... and the February 20th Movement was just a twist of conscience that gathered all these things.” When I asked him why he coordinated the movement, he said, “We were [aware] that everyone and his place, struggling for his own cause, will never reach any results, because they are not enough on the street. They are very weak. The solution is to gather, to have the number, and when you have the number... your demands can be heard. This is the main reason that made all the organizations to gather in the same movement.” I asked him if there was a specific reason, be it the economy, healthcare, or something else, for which he protested, and to this he replied, “The economy is the reason for many of the struggles in Morocco, but the new thing that was brought in by the February 20th Movement is the political demands. We need democracy. We need a civil state. We need a punishment of every financial criminal and political criminal.” The February 20th Movement, he said, was a force that “finally” fought for

Soukaina worked with AMDH before joining the February 20th Movement. She said that she “wasn’t with them [the movement] from the start,” but she was on the street for the Day of Dignity, and later began attending the weekly meetings.

How They Participated

Mohamed had to remain largely removed from the movement, despite his feelings of empathy for the protestors. “It was not so easy that we were critic[al] of the thinking [of the government], so I make a distance,” he says. “But I was interested [in reading up on the movement]...but [I couldn’t] be [an] activist.” However, he made contact with individual
protestors to proclaim private, if not public, support. Mohamed was happy to show me his nondirect participation. Claiming inspiration from the movement, he has organized days to increase communal interaction and knowledge, including a day of shared reading, where participants spent an entire day reading with one another. He has also spearheaded a movement to release a political cartoonist imprisoned for criticizing the king.

Rania was incredibly active in spreading the word over the Internet and leading the demonstrations. In addition to making the initial video, she worked behind the scenes in many forms: she helped in making and distributing flyers on the street; she worked on translating information between Arabic, French, and English; she helped write up the movement’s mission statement; and she also attended the daily meetings that happened before the march on February 20th.

Karima told me that she “participated in the first debate, before the creation of the movement, and then... decided to go out on demonstrations as the movement of the 20th of February.” She also “attended the meeting[s] which [took place in] the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH), and... also participated [in] almost all demonstrations.”

Driss was instrumental in organizing the initial protests. His voice was one of the movement’s loudest. He also drew international attention to the movement when he was
arrested. (At one point in the interview, he proudly informed me that one prominent American newspaper had written an article on his imprisonment.)

Soukaina is still active within the movement. She attended protests associated with the movement all throughout 2011, and has since branched off into other causes, ranging from unemployment to preventing street harassment in Morocco. She also helped in the creation of “My Makhzen and Me,” the movie that served as my introduction to the February 20th Movement.

How Their Friends and Families Reacted

Mohamed said that he erred on the side of caution when it came to his involvement with the February 20th Movement. This is partially due to the warnings of close family and members and friends: “in my family, in my job, all of people [didn’t] want [me] to be on the street, and they told me that it was dangerous to go to this. We didn’t know if there would be killing in the street. We have seen this happen in Tunisia... And they tell me that it’s so dangerous for me. But I think that the change has a price. I do as much as I possibly can. This is to think, to act nonviolently, and to discuss.” He adds that, “I think that the young, like in the video, were more courageous than us [in previous generations], because when they make the video, many problems come to them because there is so much control, with the police, the secret networks.”

Rania admitted, “My mother was kind of shocked because I didn’t tell her anything about it before releasing the video. I was in the video with my brother because I knew that she would know about the video from someone else. She knew about the movement, but she didn’t know that we were involved in it. My mom was really scared, but she was
supportive. Both my parents were supportive.” I asked her what her father thought, as a longtime political prisoner, and she said, “I think he was proud. It’s like a continuation. He has started something, and now we are continuing what he has started. He was [afraid]. He was predicting so many things. He was right about everything he said... Like how things will end, because we were so proud of the movement... He knew everything.”

In her e-mail, Karima said, “I think I’m lucky to belong to a[n understanding] family who [have] always encouraged me and who [have also] attended all the demonstrations of the movement because the[y] believed in the claims we asked for.”

Driss had no problem gaining the support of his family. Both of his parents were prominent figures of political opposition, so they were very encouraging of their son’s involvement. The reputation of his parents also gave Driss some security in his protests: he said that the Moroccan government was not eager to draw attention to themselves by having the police beat him on the street.

Soukaina said her family and friends discouraged her involvement at first: “I [would] speak with them, and first of all they told me, ‘No, don’t go with those people, you’re going to be arrested,’ because here in Morocco, there [has been a long period of] oppression, so it’s difficult to regain trust.”

*How They Related to the “Arab Spring”*

When I asked Mohamed if he thought that the February 20th Movement would have happened without the protests in Tunisia and in Tahrir Square, he said no. “These things were like the spark for the movement. Morocco was ready [for change], we just needed a spark.”
In regards to the rest of the Arab Spring, Rania said, “I think we were inspired by what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, and it was one of the reasons that made us go to the streets: seeing what was happening in both countries, and seeing that we have the same problems, even worse problems, and yeah, we have to do this thing, especially that the people and the regime was talking about the ‘Moroccan exception.’ We are not an exception at all. We have the same problems.” Her ending comment echoes the sentiments of Dabashi

When I asked her if the emergence of the February 20th Movement did not depend on the Arab Spring, Karima responded, “I think yes [the movement would have started without the Arab Spring happening in other countries], because before the start of the movement, from the 1960s till now, there always were demonstrations, uprisings... (Casablanca, the Rif, the North of Morocco, Sidi Ifni, Sefrou...) we have serious issues, and people start to get aware of it, but a big majority are still afraid of going out and demonstrate, and the movement gave a new breath to those people.” She also says, that there has been communication with movements from other countries “to meet activists from other countries” and “discuss about the situation in our countries, the issues we have.”

Like the others, I asked Driss his opinion on how the February 20th Movement related to the Arab Spring. To this, he replied, “We have all the conditions to see a movement rising, but it wasn’t possible. The last ingredient, the last element, was Tunisia and Egypt. When we have seen what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, it was really automatically, we have to go, we have to—not to do like them, not an imitation—because they gave you some hope, but we have all the conditions of the rising of a big movement.”
In addition, Driss said that communication with movements outside of Morocco happened, but was not very effective: "Communication was very weak. But we are in touch with movements from the region. We are in touch with the Occupy Movement, people in France and Spain and Greece, but just solidarity. It’s symbolic. We hope we can fight together, but... [trails off]"

Soukaina was quick to point out to me that the number of protestors in Morocco outnumbered that of Tunisia. For her, comparisons were inevitable. She said that the rest of the countries in the MENA region held up a mirror to Morocco—as soon as activity began happening in places like Tunisia and Egypt, she said that Moroccans began to look at their own country. Jordan, due to its similar government system, is one country in particular to which Moroccans look: “When something happens to the Jordanian king, we think that things could change here.”

Their Accomplishments and Their Disappointments

Mohamed bluntly told me, “I don’t think that the movement has power. But it still makes fear.” He remarked quite a bit on the symbolic success of the February 20th Movement in the context of the Arab Spring. “This movement called for essential things, for bigger things. It was not to have a job, but to have dignity, because before in Morocco we have a lot of demonstrations, but with the revolution it was a question of dignity, of citizenship. And we had the question—what is that? What is citizenship? For all of the revolution—in Tunisia, in Egypt, here in Morocco, in Yemen, in Syria, in all of this—what was the new thing? To call for dignity. [Before,] it was not a priority. If they gave you food,
you would be happy. If they gave you a job, you would be happy. But me, I have a job. And I have my integrity. That is the real difference. So it was pretty historic for us.”

When I first met Rania, I could tell that she was frustrated with the February 20th Movement. “I don’t go to the [weekly] meetings anymore. I stopped a long time ago.” When I asked her why this was the case, she said that they were “stupid,” and that nothing was accomplished. Rania said, “The problem of the movement is that so many of its constituents think that we are just a movement that can go to the streets and shout out without work, without working with the people, without having suggestions about what we want to change. And this is why so many people do not go to the meeting anymore.” She added, “This is what made the movement fail. It’s about being realistic. Politics is the art of what is possible.” I then asked her if she would say that there has been any measurable change, and she said, “I don’t think anything has changed. There is [just] hope for change. We asked for a constitution with a separation of powers. We asked for a parliamentary monarchy, a king who reigns but who doesn’t govern. We asked for an independent judiciary. Right now we have a king who has all the power. He’s the head of everything, including the judiciary. There’s no freedom of expression. People cannot write freely. Activists are in prisons. And we have an Islamist government that has no power. This is what we have. And a lot of frustrations.”

Rania remained optimistic, though, about the lasting effects of the February 20th Movement: “I don’t think that the movement is over. The soul of the movement is living... The movement is leading to other movements. It all happened after the movement. The people are there, they are speaking about their rights, and it’s all because of the movement.”
I asked Driss what he thought of the new constitution that came after the protests, and he dismissed it as a “hypocritical game” that is not representative of the people. “The constitution was just a text proposed by just one party, not two, not three, not four. They just relifted the old text and gave us the text...and the constitution [was] adopted and the same thing with the elections of the government. With this constitution, the king remained the first imam, the first soldier, the first cop, the first judge, the first person who decides all the policies. There is no separation of powers. The government has no power. At the same time, the king is the first businessman of the country, the first in agriculture, the first banker, the first in real estate... the first in everything! This is the constitution of Morocco: the king has everything.”

Driss found that dealing with the mindset of the typical Moroccan proved to be a major obstacle in carrying on the energy of the movement. “The problem is that nobody cares,” he vented. “This country and this people—they don’t give a damn. They live for themselves. The streets: not our problem. The people: not our problem. The neighborhood: not our problem. The country: not our problem. This [complacency] is the main problem. And if you give to people the minimum, make them feel that their taxes pay the hospital, their taxes pay the street [maintenance], all these things, I think they will be involved in all the things.” I asked him how it would be possible to entice people to become politically involved, and he clarified that he was talking more about the creation of a collective spirit. The issue is not, he said, “getting people politically engaged,” but “just involved with their society. A feeling that they don’t live alone. I know I’ve been to giant gatherings and go in front of the parliament. I just want people to not feel alone. We live and we are in the same situation. Everything that happen will touch us, and so we need to
be [aware] that we are not living alone. We are not living alone in this country. We have the same destiny. So we need to act or to think for a better life for everybody. It’s not political engagement, it’s the minimum of political conscience.” He did see some steps taken towards this as a result of the movement: “The movement was [a] fight [against] oppression... The movement changed one thing: conscience. People do not have fear anymore. Not all the people, but some of them don’t have fear. They are not afraid to go to the streets. This is a little step in the process.”

Karima, like the other activists, was both frustrated and hopeful. She said that “socially, people are no longer afraid to talk about politics, even [though] a very big majority [still] regards the king as a sacred person, that cannot be judged. Politicians tried to use the movement to arrive to the government, like the Party of Justice and Development [PJD] did. The king announced some ‘fake’ changes, but still not what we went out for[;] he made a new constitution which is not much different from the other.” She also says, “The greatest thing the movement did, is that it made people aware of their rights, and not afraid to go out and scream for it.”

Soukaina affirms the opening up of political discussion post-February 20th. “Before, [when you wanted to] talk about the king [or] about the monarchy with university students, it was something in school that, no, you [must] not talk about it. But now it is changed.”

What They Think Lies Ahead

Mohamed says, “The spirit of the movement is reaching everywhere. Every institution: justice, maybe in the police, but in a different way. You are not with the
movement, but we do something that we call hope, so that is in the spirit of the movement. It was a spirit. It was a great earthquake—and you can’t stop this spirit.” When I asked him if this spirit will allow for the existence of future movements like the February 20th Movement, he said, “I think that we will have a [movement that is comparative]. Because we will go on with our struggles, after Tunisia, after Egypt. After some years, they will have society, the government. They have their dignity. Because we have started something, but we have reached an obstacle. The PJD is a half solution. With the half solution, you don’t resolve the problem. So yes, there will be violence. But it will be dispersed, not concentrated.” He adds, “If the power understands, and makes great change, maybe that stops the violence, maybe that’s a step to something else. And the step for me is parliamentary monarchy…I think that the problem of the monarchies in the Arab world will come. I don’t think all the monarchies will stay.”

When I asked her if she thought change in the future was possible, Rania said, “Possible? I won’t say it’s impossible because I still have hope… And I want to change that, and so many people want to change that, but we have tried and we have failed, because so many things are rooted in this country and you can’t change them easily, and we cannot change that in one year or two years.” In order to effect actual change, she said, ”We need a cultural revolution and we need to work on so many levels to change it. And to make people aware because they are not politically aware. Even education…the rank of Morocco concerning the education system is really really low. “

Karima remains determined to enact change in the face of the current challenges she and her fellow activists face. She wrote, “We are still demonstrating, because nothing has changed, so we won’t stop our struggle…We went out for legal [demands] of dignity,
freedom, democracy and social justice, we will be demonstrating and struggling till our [demands] are accomplished.”

When I asked him about the possibility of future uprisings, Driss gave me a qualified answer: “Maybe. But this change needs a radical change in Morocco. People need to live an experience, to be a part of an experience that changes their lives. You can’t change if your life hasn’t changed.” He went on to cite the anti-war movement that took place in America during the Vietnam War as an example of a lifestyle shift (a conservative society confronted with the Free Love movement) that accompanied a paradigm shift (disapproval of America’s fighting overseas). In order for this to happen in Morocco, “people need to gain self-confidence that they are Moroccan,” he said, “and to raise their quality of life.” He added on the likelihood of this happening, “What I learned from experience is that every[thing] is luck and chance. You never can predict that these things will happen in some days, or some years. You can never know if it’s now or in three months, or never, or in thirty years. It is not people in the street that [cause] change. People in the street [are] the instrument for change. If we want real change, we have to be prepared, because we don’t do revolution for Islamists; we don’t do revolution for neoliberals; we don’t do for America, for France. We do revolution for us, for our dignity and freedom.”

Soukaina backed up many of Karima’s sentiments about the future of activism in Morocco. She, too, was frustrated with the lack of progress made since the initial protests. However, like Karima, she continues to be active on the street. “In three to five years,” she said, “I think there will be another February 20th Movement.”
Conclusion

In setting out to research how protestors related to their society, as well as the Arab Spring, I found that relations between the February 20th Movement and Morocco were part of an ever-changing interaction that dictates the realities of the social world, which in turn both affects and is affected by the political realities of the country.

While change in Morocco may happen, and may even be inevitable, it certainly will not be easy. Mohamed confessed to me, “It is not so easy to talk about the king in Morocco... It is difficult because as citizens you are alone. And the government can defeat you because you are alone.” And while the February 20th Movement did its part to open discussion, the political dialogue in Morocco remains mostly one-sided. Nevertheless, while the political situation has changed minimally, there has been a development in the social dynamics of Morocco. My respondents regularly brought up the more communal feelings present since the winter of 2011. They also stressed the importance of this collective identity in future protests. This has allowed them to remain largely optimistic for the future of Moroccan politics, even after the February 20th Movement lost its energy without achieving the institution of a parliamentary monarchy.

On a lighter note, the communities formed thanks to the February 20th Movement were not only of a political bent. While I was walking with Soukaina, she pointed out the two women she was with earlier, ahead of us by a few feet. “The movement is not all serious,” she said. “Because of it, I have made many new friends. We go out together, we hang out.” It is these newly formed connections that allow for the unity these activists seek. It is the friendships they made that can set in motion the wheels of political change.
Study Limitations

I acknowledge the many limitations that shaped my research. Several of these issues were practical: I had just one month to read up on the movement, conduct interviews, and develop a conclusion. As a result, I only successfully reached six participants. This sample size can hardly allow for any generalizations, not only due to the limited quantity, but also due to the limited variety of respondents. All of my respondents were living in Rabat during the winter and spring of 2011, thus excluding a great deal of the protestors who demonstrated in more rural settings. This is an important distinction: I was told repeatedly by my respondents that living in Rabat gave them exposure, as well as protection from the worst of the government’s. Most of the violence and the arrests took place in smaller cities, removed from the eyes of diplomats. They were all also well educated: with the exception of Mohamed who works in the government, all of my respondents were students in higher education. However, I believe that this rather homogeneous sample composition reflects a certain truth regarding the demographics of the movement: while February 20th was not limited to the youth of Morocco, it was certainly more attuned to the wants and needs of the Facebook Generation. It was also thanks to the widespread use of these technologies and websites that are accessed more often by youth that the movement was propagated.

Recommendations for Further Study

I thoroughly enjoyed my meetings with the activists of the February 20th Movement, and I appreciated their frankness and willingness to take time to talk with me. My research in Rabat, though, is different than what information could be gathered from the more rural
branches of the February 20\textsuperscript{th} Movement, such as in southern towns with uprisings like Tinghir or Imider. There are thus two avenues that I would recommend studying in the future: how protest movements like the February 20\textsuperscript{th} Movement create communities within these smaller townships, and how these protest communities interact with society at large; and the networks that connect these branches of a protest movement to the larger body.

We must also keep in mind the dynamic nature of activism in Morocco. If, as Othmane says, another large uprising happens in Morocco within the next few years, it will be important to return our focus to Rabat, or wherever such activity takes place.
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Appendix

Interview Questions

Can you give me some background on yourself? (For example, what you do, and where you’re from?)

When did you get involved in the February 20th Movement? Why did you get involved?

How have you participated? Did you attend meetings; did you demonstrate?

How did your family and friends react to your involvement in the movement? (Were they supportive? Did they discourage you from participating?)

We talk a lot about the Arab Spring in terms of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. How do you relate the February 20th Movement to these other movements happening in Arab countries?

Do you think that the February 20th Movement would have started without the demonstrations in other countries?

Have you communicated a lot with people from other countries?

How do you think the Movement has changed Morocco? (Politically, socially, etc)

What do you think the February 20th Movement’s greatest accomplishments are?

What do you envision for the future of the February 20th Movement?

Is there anything else that you would want to say?
Déclaration de consentement

L’objectif d’étude
L’activisme politique chez les jeunes marocains

La durée et les éléments d’étude
Cette étude sera dirigée pendant une période de quatre semaines, et ce à partir du 12 Novembre jusqu’au 9 Décembre 2012. L’étude inclura les observations et les interventions des participants en incluant leur travail sur terrain.

Les risques
L’étude n’a aucun risque prévisible pour les participants. Cependant, si vous ne vous sentez pas confortable avec le procédé d’observation ou d’interview, vous êtes libre de terminer votre participation.

Compensation
La participation à cette étude ne sera pas compensée, financièrement ou autrement. Cependant, votre aide est considérablement appréciée par notre équipe de recherche.

Confidentialité
Tout effort de maintenir votre information personnelle confidentielle sera fait dans ce projet. Vos noms et toute autre information d’identification seront changés dans la description finale, et seulement connue à l’équipe de recherche.

Participation
Je soussigné, ………………………………………….., confirme avoir lu les rapports ci-dessus et compris que ma participation à cette étude est volontaire tout en ayant la liberté de retirer mon consentement à tout moment sans pénalité.

_________________________  ___________  ___________
Signature                      Date

J’ai pris conscience que cette étude puisse comporter les entrevues et/ou les observations qui peuvent être enregistrées et transcrites.

_________________________  ___________  ___________
Signature                      Date

Team de recherche
Leah Siegel
siegell@whitman.edu  06 21 51 68 73

Les chercheurs peuvent être contactés par E-mail ou téléphone pour n’importe quelle raison.
Notes


ii For a more complete timeline of the movement, see http://moroccansforchange.com/2011/03/26/feb20-timeline-what-next-morocco/


v In fact, in “Dissent in Morocco: Not all for One,” Samia Errazzouki forewarns against placing too much emphasis on the February 20th protests: “While the February 20th Movement is a major component of opposition in Morocco, describing dissent as a matter limited to just the February 20th Movement not only serves those who cite ‘Moroccan exceptionalism,’ but also belittles the presence of dissent in other spheres of Moroccan society. Like popular dissent elsewhere, the Moroccan brand has political, economic, and social roots, is present in both rural and urban areas, and has diverse followers.”


vii Ibid., 9.

viii For example, http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jul/05/how-morocco-dodged-arab-spring/


x Ibid., 42.

xi Ibid., 49.

xii Ibid., 43.

xiii Ibid., 48.

xiv Ibid., 45.


xvi Ibid.

xviii Ibid.


xxi See Appendix “Déclaration de consentement”

xxii Many of my respondents said that they would not mind having their real name published. For the sake of research ethics, I still assigned false names to each of them. These names are randomly chosen, common Moroccan names.

xxiii See Appendix, “Interview Questions”