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Hirak activists in Morocco: Innovative newcomers?

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the reconfigurations of the Moroccan protest scene by focusing on the Hirak movement in the Rif region. It depicts the social world (professional and everyday activities) of Hirak activists and the mechanisms that distinguish them from conventional activists (mainly discourse type and contentious actions). Particular interest is dedicated to the innovative protest actions employed during this protest phase. By highlighting the networks of mobilization and the core basis of the movement, the article provides insights into its durability and deep-rootedness. If the strong dismissal of classical intermediary structures (political parties, associations, unions) testifies different visions towards politics, one should not draw a strict dichotomy between the two spaces of commitment as multi-positioned activists contribute to the circulation of know-hows and competences.

Introduction

In October 2016, protests erupted in Morocco's northern Rif region, a region characterized by its economic and cultural marginalization, its conflictual relation with the political center and its memory of vigorous resistance against Spanish and French colonialism. Demonstrations sparked after the death of Mouhcine Fikri, a fishmonger crushed in a garbage truck after he opposed the seizure of his merchandise. The Hirak movement emerged in November of the same year and led the protests during several months before its main leaders were arrested and jailed in May 2017. Afterwards, all gatherings were met with repression, especially in Al Hoceima, the epicenter of protests.

The aim of the article is to assess the reconfigurations of the Moroccan protest scene by focusing on the activists of "Hirak Al Chaabi". We shed light particularly on the trajectories of activists that led "Hirak Al Chaabi" and the forms of collective action they used during this contentious episode. Consequently, we do not recount the chronology of events.

The Hirak activists constantly assert that their movement broke with conventional commitment in Morocco and innovated in the conduct of action. To avoid the reification of these statements, one should center on personal trajectories, roles and actions, strategies of alliance and opposition. It is true that the discourse of the Hirak (especially of its leader Nasser Zafzafi) was virulent against all political parties (called "*dakakin siyasiya*", political shops) and associations of civil society (called "*jam'iyat istirzaqiya*", mercenary associations). None of the prominent activists belonged to a political party or an association, and only a few had a union affiliation. For nonpartisan actors to lead collective action in Morocco is not something new, but the Hirak crystallized this trend to its paroxysm.

In their collective self-presentation, Hirak participants use the term activists (Nuchata'a Al Hirak Al Chaabi). Their emphasis on this term is not fortuitous or ornamental; it highlights the construction of a category distinctive from the leftist activist (Al Munadhil). These categories are not immanent; they are the product of a conflictual dynamic involving several individuals and groups around the definition of a sense to the protests in Al Hoceima. In addition, the cleavage "nachit"/"munadhil" is pre-reflexive rather than reflexive. It is a distinctive characteristic forged in the course of action to gain popular support and delegitimize other rivals based on the backing they have (Bailey, 1969).

Rather than drawing an arbitrary boundary between the "nachit" and the "munadhil", we reconstitute the symbolic struggles underlying this antagonism and the differential motives, positions, and trajectories of the contenders. Our purpose is not to establish a genealogy of the categories "nachit" and "munadhil" in the Moroccan political scene to avoid the over-determination of a cleavage inextricably peculiar to a local configuration and hence, avert a teleological interpretation. Also, this distinction serves as a starting point and does not constitute the main theme of the article. The construction of a "us" (Riffians) against a "them" (The Makhzen) is the matrix by which antagonistic principles of vision and divisions are shaped among Hirak participants. The labelling of a common adversary through a dichotomy "us" versus "them" (Gamson, 1992) is informed by a conflictual memory of relations between a marginalized political, economically and culturally peripheral on one hand and a powerful political center on the other. Yet, one should not infer a homogenized memory determining in a linear fashion contentious conducts.

Following Halbwachs, an individual memory is a viewpoint on collective memory, a viewpoint that depends on the occupied social position and the relations sustained with other social groups. (Halbwachs, 1950).

Struggles for the leading of mobilization

Linking Mouhcine Fikri's death to the genesis of a HIRAK led by young nonpartisan actors (and particularly Nasser Zafzafi) in a mechanic and spontaneous fashion, leads us inevitably to bypass struggles for the control of mobilization.

During the month of November 2016, Al Hoceima's streets saw gatherings and demonstrations on a weekly basis. The main square of the city served as a locus for holding informal discussions and preparing banners; moreover, there were live broadcasts via social media of the general assemblies held there. These spaces assert the presence of horizontal mechanisms of deliberation and organization, which means a trend is rising: Partisan and associative actors are not associated to the direction of performances and are evicted by the young activists who labelled the protest movement as "Al HIRAK Al Chaabi" in Al Hoceima. Excluded from the HIRAK are not only political parties and associations close to the Makhzen, but also organizations located on the left of political spectrum (such as "Annahj Addimoqrati" and the Moroccan Association of Human Rights), which are known for their long-record of opposition. Activists base their stance on the "negative roles" these organizations played at a local level in past experiences of collective mobilization.

The experience of 20th February movement (M20F)¹ had been determinant in the formation of such perceptions. As in other towns and localities, networks of the 20th February were structured around two poles: The 20th February Youth (mainly independent activists) and the support committee (formed by parties, associations). Most of the HIRAK leaders participated in the M20F at various levels and blamed partisan and associative actors for their inclinations to "control, personal susceptibilities and obstructions". They also criticized their cautious attitude in dealing with the case of the 5 youths whose bodies were found burned at a bank

office in Al Hoceima on 20 February 2011². We do not intend to hierarchize individuals and groups on a scale of militancy credentials, but we can – from a sociological perspective – see different visions and behaviors towards politics and collective action.

The activists of the HIRAK adopted a virulent tone against the leftist activist (*munadhil*) as they saw that the commitment of the latter is supposedly motivated by venal interests and his repeated collusions with Makhzen downgrade popular mobilizations. To support their claims, they give examples of former leftist militants who became powerful leaders of the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), a party close to the Royal Palace; moreover, it was found in 2008 that it includes members of the Justice and Development Party (PJD). They also make mention of the activists of the National Moroccan Association of Unemployed Graduates (ANDCM) whose commitment is supposedly "khobzist" (material) because their horizon of claims is limited to the obtainment of a job in civil service, which deems their dependency on administrative favors exacerbated, and hence their political autonomy appears weak.

Undoubtedly, by dismissing partisan and associative structures, the HIRAK rejected implicitly a model of commitment. The predominant model of commitment in Al Hoceima was that of the leftist activist that socialized at university campuses (especially in Fez and Oujda). Activists of the HIRAK (and especially Nasser Zafzafi) stressed that leftist militants used an abstractive rhetoric in classical Arabic that was unintelligible to many categories of Riffian society. By contrast, the combined use of Tarifit, Darija and classical Arabic by Nasser Zafzafi gave him a greater appeal among larger social categories.

This is a first differential mechanism. HIRAK activists and leftist militants pursue different models of action and interaction with the public. Leftist militants have

¹ The movement that led 2011-2012 Moroccan protests. See Bennani-Chraïbi and Jekhally (2012), Smaoui and Wazif (2013)

² Contradictory versions exist on the exact circumstances of this incident. HIRAK activists blamed parties and associations for their insufficient involvement in shedding light on this case.

routinized their modes of actions over the years; they extensively rely on workshops, roundtables, reports with recommendations and sit-ins. The use of sit-ins indicates a will to monitor ranks and avert disorder (Vairel, 2005). In contrast, Hirak activists employ an ordinary speech and favor street action over organizational procedures. The distinctions in discourse denote contrasting modes of appropriation of politics. Through a broad utilization of videos in an ordinary language broadcasted on social media platforms, Zafzafi managed to reach out to popular categories of society whose social and

cognitive competences do not permit them to make sense of the conventional discourse of leftist activists which is marked by abstractive formulations.

No model of commitment is more valuable than the other; the sole purpose is to emphasize the different sites of socialization through which activists and militants passed by and hence, underline the contrasting schemes of perception and action they are bearing.

Hirak activists and leftist militants pursue different models of action and interaction with the public.

One must nuance a strict dichotomy between spaces of socialization. Several Hirak activists who have a major inclination towards ground mobilization were militants of the Amazigh Cultural Movement (MCA) during their university studies, especially on Oujda campus. If university campuses were traditionally marked by rivalries between Islamists and leftists over control, the case of Hirak shows us that Amazigh student factions – as instances of political socialization – are increasingly providing participants for social movements. More broadly speaking, Amazigh movement and associations have been known for going for street demonstrations in the last few years (participating during the M20F-led protests, advocating the Amazigh language and culture, protesting against land expropriations, etc.).

The sociological profiles of Hirak activists are heterogeneous; nonetheless, professions appear to be a common ground. A great majority of them have alternated periods of unemployment and periods of minor occupations and various jobs. The types of jobs are inextricably linked to the local economic configuration of Al Hoceima. The economy of the town is traditionally marked by fishing activities and the absence of productive industrial units. However, even activities related to fishing are declining and the rest of occupations consist of small commercial activities, that is Hirak activists engage mostly in the following occupations: barber, waiter, carpenter, citizen journalist, or owner of cafés, small hostels, or stores selling mobile phones, clothes, jewelry, etc.). Other participants have a more stable professional occupation (teacher, grocery owner, etc.). The limited scope of professional horizons combined with the small size of the city and the modest number of its inhabitants mean strong acquaintances among members. The sharing of common narratives (Abdelkrim-led resistance, previous episodes of earthquakes, etc.) bolster the sense of belonging to a local community. It is important to bear in mind that social activities do not take place in segmented spheres. We should rather think of these activities in a

horizontal continuum: two activists will not necessarily meet for discussing the preparation of an action after their strictly delimited working hours, but one activist will join another in his store and they will open up a discussion right on the doorstep. Then, another activist passing inadvertently will join them. Because of the close connection among them, they can address serious matters such as preparing the logistics of a march and discuss as well critical questions. In other words, this example highlights the imbrication of professional, social and activist temporalities and worlds. We can only subscribe to the idea of continuity between routines activities and contentious actions (Auyero, 2004).

In addition, Hirak activists are mostly linked by bonds of friendship and neighboring. It is true that many of them have met at universities or during the 20th February movement, but these experiences and spaces must be apprehended as moments for acquiring competences and know-how in shouting slogans, organizing a demonstration, chairing an assembly, etc. Connections among activists are pre-existing and have been forged around routine activities of sociability. Examples include informal discussions in neighborhoods or in front of shops, long moments of “killing time in a café”, etc. This local configuration induces strong proximities in space and contiguities in social and cultural positions.

The basis of Hirak is primarily built around young people. Hirak leaders are not professional agents of politics cultivating a form of cognitive and professional distinction. If there is a distinction, it is the ability to spark a protest movement and prevent what they call “infiltrations” or attempts to “dismiss” (*nasf*) the Hirak. Through their trajectories, routines activities and type of discourse, Hirak leaders nourish a form of descriptive representation (Manin, 1995). Because leaders and ordinary participants share similar living conditions, and ways of thinking and behaving, sentiments of identification are more likely to occur.

Tactical innovation as a form of distinction

The key mechanism of differentiation between the Hirak and previous movements lies in the modes of contentious actions deployed. Activists have used classical modes of action (demonstrations, gatherings, strikes, etc.), and deployed new ones as well. We can make mention of *chen-ten*³, *tentana*⁴, protests on beaches, cortege of honning cars, etc.

The “chen-ten” is the main innovative action brought about by the Hirak. Its novel feature resides foremost in the preparation of action. “Chen-ten” is a sudden demonstration; its starts after the live broadcasting of a video through social networks by Zafzafi. The latter would generally walk down the street, surrounded by core activists who would be calling on supporters to join them for demonstrating. In a few minutes, hundreds of individuals and micro-groups join the march and the ranks grow gradually. The objective is the institutionalization of a march despite difficulties: At the beginning, activists are no more than a dozen, and have to interrupt traffic circulation and chant slogans. The demonstration then starts taking shape gradually: a banner is deployed at the front, yellow jackets are distributed and human chains are formed to prevent eventual provocations. Another prominent characteristic is that protesters quickly start arriving from all the districts of the city. If commencements are “artisanal” and sometimes confused, the march achieves at some stage a degree of sophistication as if it was announced days before and prepared carefully.

“Chen-ten” emerged at a time when conditions for organizing planned demonstrations were impossible. In January and February 2017, security forces tightened their grip on public places. The idea emerged at that time and was discussed in circumscribed meetings since even general assemblies were banned. The first “chen-

ten” was organized on 24 February, to commemorate the earthquake that shook Hoceima on 24 February 2004. The success of the protest mode lies in keeping the moment and locus of protesting unknown and announcing it only a few minutes ahead of the effective start. By creating a surprise effect, authorities face difficulties while dealing with this sudden performance.

A number of narratives depict “chen-ten” in a spontaneous and heroic manner. Masses of people who did not know previously the occurrence of a performance suddenly join the appeal of Nasser Zafzafi for demonstrating. These narratives bypass the effective mobilizing work done by activists in districts and neighborhoods. On the day before or during the hours ahead of the performance, activists go to their neighborhoods and inform their reliable friends about the possibility of an imminent action. Those individuals are expected to tell the message to other friends and so on. The message is not relayed to simply any person; it is chiefly relayed to close and trustworthy friends, mainly young people. This is why we advanced the hypothesis that the core basis of the Hirak comprises young people. Young people are biographically available for a direct action such as “chen-ten” since unemployment rate among this social category is high. Moreover, youths always ask major activists about when the next chen-ten will be held⁵. It is also worth noting that their activities and spaces of meetings (sitting at the café, discussing at a strategic corner, having a beach picnic, etc.) are similar to those of the activists. Trust and confidence seem to be important variables at work, considering the confidentiality surrounding the preparation of this action. Again, the conjunction of two mechanisms seem at work here: close bonds of friendship forged in the neighborhood, at school, or at work in a small-

³ It means «quick move » or « agility » in the vernacular language

⁴ A form of protest that consists in banging utensils to capture the attention of officials. This action was obviously borrowed from Argentinian repertoire of contention.

⁵ This affirmation was a recurring theme during our interviews

size city; and shared cultural, moral and political norms (Abdelkrim-led resistance, distinct idioms and codes of behaviors).

By emphasizing the relational, planned and neighborhood-localized features of mobilization, we effectively overcome the spontaneous and heroic approach. We should also keep in mind the indeterminate accomplishment of action. The necessity of rapidly carrying out the performance hinders a smooth or carefully-planned deployment. We should apprehend the performance as a display of “disciplined improvisations” rather than “predetermined historical scripts” (Gould, 1995) or spontaneous instincts. We can therefore sharpen the sociological profile of the activist and the relational networks of the HIRAK activist: Major HIRAK activists are perceived as *wlad el houma* (boys of the neighborhood) and mobilize primarily among boys of neighborhood. Because of their visibility in demonstrations, general assemblies or social networks, HIRAK activists constitute models of identification. Their voice is heard and their efforts are appreciated. This proximity is amplified if the activist was already well-known among his neighbors.

Thus, the specificity of chen-ten lies in its confidential preparation, its sudden surge and by corollary, its alteration of security forces expectations who can't react in due course. Yet, the objective is to form a march.

According to Tilly “New performances arise chiefly through innovation within existing performances” (Tilly, 2008), and more importantly, “the more connected the histories of actors outside of contention, the more similar their repertoires”. That is, if HIRAK activists assert continuously their innovative style, their forms of action derive from a constituted repertoire of contention. Moreover, by building on Tilly's idea, we formulate the hypothesis that the emergence of new performances is facilitated by the proximities and similitudes of HIRAK activists' social characteristics and interpersonal networks. The emergence of new performances owes much to the reflexive efforts of activists; nevertheless, they must be replaced in the context of security constraints on gatherings during this period in January and February 2017. Tactical innovation is thus favored by the emergence of new actors, changes in alliances of protestors, rupture in political routines and types of repressive responses (Fillieule, 2010)

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Conclusion

After shedding light on issues related to innovative actions, we will return here to the question of differential spheres of commitment.

We should not draw a strict dichotomy between the two spaces of commitment; some activists contribute to mediate between them through the transmission of know-hows and visions of politics. The example of Mohamed Mejjoui is paradigmatic in this sense. He was a former militant in the National Moroccan Association of Unemployed Graduates, a former member of the party "Annahj Addimoqrati", and a student activist at Oujda campus. During the course of the Hirak, he was affiliated with the Moroccan Workers' Union. Mejjoui has delivered tremendous on-the-ground work and enjoys organizational experience accumulated at both the local and national level, as well as relations with various groups in several sites (unions, political parties) and abilities to conciliate among opposing viewpoints. The case of Mejjoui, a leftist unanimously appreciated and respected by all the participants we met, shows that the presence of individuals with an estimable activist

track, involved in various networks but not affiliated to a political party is valued. Hence, it can be seen as a hypothesis for explaining the declining capacity of left parties to enroll adherents and mobilize them, a trend affecting governmental and nongovernmental left parties. We observe here a reconfiguration of leftist activism: a loosening of ties to political parties, a selective investment in localized mobilizations, and a reinvestment of competences acquired in multiple sites. Again, this trend is not new. Numerous individuals that formed the M20F networks had distanced themselves from left parties and were either engaged in alternative associative engagements or fostering links with other politics actors through common collective actions (eg. of coordination committees against the high cost of living). If the gap between the partisan/associative spheres and the space of social movements has widened, one should focus on networks contributing to the circulation of competences, know-hows and ideas. As Goffman (1971) says, even transgressors of conventions draw on common social idioms.

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