

# Territorial Stress in Morocco: From Democratic to Autonomist Demands in Popular Protests in the Rif

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**ABSTRACT** *This article analyses the evolution of popular protest in the Rif within the Moroccan context of contention. It considers the specificity of the demands expressed and the strategies for mobilization adopted as a result of a long-term process of regional activism. The article finds that protesters in the Rif have had agency to conduct their own strategies, using the opportunity structure opened at state level to advance their own agenda. The pre-existing mobilizing structures and the reproduction of patterns of centre–periphery tension in the course of the contention have fostered a progressive localization of protest in the region, which has strengthened regional identity and regionalist activism in the Rif.*

## Introduction

Since independence and the unification of the country, northern Morocco, and specifically the Amazigh (Berber) region of the Rif, have experienced an enduring peripheralization through the state, a factor which has strengthened Rifian regional identity and activism. For this reason, the term ‘territorial stress’, coined by Naciri (1999) to refer to the difficulties of the Makhzen in extending full control over its territory throughout the twentieth century, is used in this article to allude to the depth of penetration that centrifugal forces have had in Rifian civil society and the regional political realm in the last decade. It is also used to refer to the significant challenges they present to the Moroccan state, directly affecting some of its foundational pillars. Regionalist demands have ranged from the recognition of Rifian cultural and linguistic particularisms to demands for state investment in modernizing and transforming the region’s economic structure and the establishment of a regional autonomous entity with power to manage its internal affairs.

Regionalism is not a new phenomenon in the Rif, but an evolution of the periphery’s reaction to the expansion of the centre, its authority, the dominance of its administrative and political systems and the imposition of its culture and language.

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Nonetheless, the increasing presence of regionalism in Rifian politics has been fostered by an array of different factors. These have permitted the consolidation of different mobilizing structures, which have led to popular protest in the region during the so-called Arab Spring. These factors include both the opportunity structure offered in the reconfiguration of the authoritarian system developed since the late 1990s in Morocco, and the agency of certain regional actors, such as local leaders of associations and political parties, in influencing the strategies to adopt in the centre–periphery relationship and within the Moroccan political system.

Local activist groups and elites in the Rif have therefore developed their own patterns of interaction with the centre and their own demands for political activism and politics at state level, deploying their strategies in both institutional and non-institutional spheres. In this special issue, the analysis of this progressive implantation of regional activism in the Rif is framed against a background that sees peripheries as dynamic structures, able to produce counter-hegemonic alternatives that challenge the centre in the long term, rather than as being submissive spaces under a dominant core. Moreover, peripheries are considered here not as monolithic spaces but as permanent sources of plurality.

These particularisms of Rifian politics and activism were present and apparent once the cycle of popular protest started in Morocco in 2011. Hence, despite the fact that the 20 February Movement's (M20F) general demands were welcomed by civil society and the Rifian population, over time the decentralized, heterogeneous and non-pyramidal nature of the M20F contributed to a progressive localization of the wave of protests, generating local discourses, demands and forms of contention. This tendency became more evident after the approval of the 2011 constitutional and regional reforms, which did not respond to Rifian demands. Thwarted expectations became the driving force behind some episodes of centre–periphery tension, in which old forms of conflict and state responses to them returned, showing the existence of a kind of path-dependency in centre–periphery relations in Morocco that the Arab Spring has not modified.

This article finds that the plurality of concerns among Moroccan protesters reflects the fact that popular protests in the country have been shaped by a concurrence of different visions about the change needed in the country and different conceptions about what the democratization of the state should entail, reinforcing the idea that uprisings in North Africa have consisted of diverse 'Arab Springs of different kinds' (Pace, 2013). In the case of the Rif, reactions and demands appeared in response not only to the evolution of popular mobilizations in Morocco but also to changes in Moroccan political life prior to the beginning of street protests in the country. Furthermore, they also displayed the persistence of old and new postcolonial problems related to issues such as transitional justice, territorial imbalances and the impacts generated by the neo-patrimonial system. The argument put forward here is therefore that peripheral actors had agency to conduct their own strategies, using the opportunity structure opened at state level to advance its own agenda, and that they were empowered with the idea that peripheral opposition was necessary for pressuring the centre to pursue political and social change. In the case of the Rif, the previous existence of rooted mobilizing structures

around regional demands at meso level, especially local associations and groups and regional forums of civil society, permitted regional protesters to develop an active and independent role.

The article is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of centre–periphery relations in Morocco, with a focus on the opportunity structure opened in the Rif during the reign of Mohammed VI for the strengthening and consolidation of a regionalist movement and awareness within Rifian activism. The mobilizing structures developed in the same period are also examined. This analysis proffers the context for the second section, which centres on the evolution of protests in the Rif during and after the Arab Spring, exploring the question why the actors involved adopted different behaviour in comparison with other parts of the country, such as the High Atlas, where hardly any mobilization took place (see Bergh & Rossi-Doria, 2015). Finally, the third section analyses the outcomes of protests, arguing that these have largely resulted in new forms of political participation, the politicization of local youth and the fostering of the regional identity.

This article is based on a period of in-depth research into Amazigh activism in Morocco and the Rif, which formed the basis of my doctoral thesis. The methodology used in the study draws on close-proximity fieldwork carried out between April 2007 and May 2011 using ethnographic observations, repeated participation in social movement campaigns, mobilizations and meetings in the Rif, semi-structured in-depth interviews, life-story compilations, the reconstruction of militant memories and discourse analysis. Regarding the territorial space of study, what this article terms ‘the Rif’ are the current provinces of Nador, Driouch and Al Hoceima.

### **Centre–Periphery Relationships and the Constitution of a Regionalist Movement in the Rif**

Even in the pre-colonial period, the Rif has been historically portrayed as a region in tension with the central authority and a main focal point of rebellion and contestation. Its resistance to colonial rule during the Spanish protectorate helped to strengthen this image, which was perpetuated throughout the postcolonial history of Morocco (Madariaga, 2010), inasmuch as the region has been the source of different episodes of contention since independence was granted in 1956. The enduring asymmetries within the country and the state’s repression of the territory have been the seed of several centre–periphery conflicts, which have reinforced regional disaffection with the Makhzen<sup>1</sup> and the emergence of different regionalist tendencies in Rifian activism over the years.

The Rif’s relationships with the central power can be analysed through Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) centre–periphery model, in which the centre attempts to gain control over the periphery through the processes of state and nation building, while the periphery tries to resist this expansionism and defend its own interests. Within this frame, regionalism is considered a natural reaction to the expansion of central authority (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983), and its origins and relations with the state can be understood through the lens of this centre–periphery model (Dahl, 2009). Nevertheless, the relationship between both poles must not be seen in a linear mode,

but subsumed in a dynamic structure, which expands and contracts, giving rise to cycles of shifting hegemony that peripheries can use to change their situation and obtain a position of 'central periphery' in the system (Ghosh-Schellhorn, 2006).

Following this comprehensive framework, the Rif can be viewed as a periphery from a fourfold perspective: from its difference in geographical, economic, ethnic and political terms; from its economic and political distance from and dependence on the centre; from its horizontality with regard to the core which controls it; and from its verticality, which permits it to establish interaction between groups. These features have shaped the Rif's peripheral situation, but they have changed over time, modifying the region's opportunity structure and consequently its patterns of action and interaction with the centre in a given context.

From independence to the late 1990s, the Rif's economic, cultural and political difference and distance from the central government were determinant for the emergence of different episodes of centre–periphery tension. The first reaction against the Rif's peripheral situation was the 1958–59 revolt, caused by the collapse of the regional economy, the under-development of education, infrastructure and employment in the region, the relative neglect by the state during the early years of independence and the assignment of official positions to people from outside the region (Ashford, 1961; Marais, 1969). That uprising gave birth to a proto-regionalist experience in which the centre's attempt at colonization and the periphery's resistance both came to the fore. State control of the revolt resulted in the imposition of central Moroccan state institutions throughout the country (Seddon, 1981). Nevertheless, the 1958–59 rebellion, the way it was stifled and the personal involvement of Prince Hassan sowed the seeds of distrust that the Rifian population has continued towards the Makhzen over subsequent decades (López, 2000; Madariaga, 2010). That feeling was consolidated due to the perpetuation of region's economic, political and cultural distance from and dependence on the centre. For example, there was no Rifian representation in the Moroccan government until the mid-1990s (López, 2000), besides economic oblivion and *laissez-faire* state policy, which left the region outside formal economic circuits, resulting in emigration, the cultivation and commerce of *kif* (hashish) and smuggling as the main sources of wealth (Planet, 1998). Moreover, the relationship between the monarchy and the Rif during Hassan II's reign was mainly characterized by public disdain, as illustrated by the king calling Rifians 'despicable people' (*aubach*) after the 1984 disturbances, which were especially strong in the Rif (López, 2000). The combination of all these features yielded particular forms of subjectivity and structures of feeling, with, as Hart (2000) asserted, the Rifians considering themselves to be somewhat apart from the rest of Morocco.

Regionalism in the Rif, like other movements committed to the national affirmation of sub-state entities, is rooted in both historical practice and in the assessment of the opportunities offered by the state (Keating, 2001). Reminiscent of typical cyclical patterns of regionalism (Hooghe, 1992) – and indeed also similar to the activism of other peripheries, as for example becomes evident in Edwige Fortier's article on expanding and contracting spaces for activism – regionalism in the Rif has undergone periods of expansion – in the distension junctures of late

1970s and from the late 1990s onwards – and contraction, forced by state cycles of repression. Considering its progression, it has presented an evolution that can be described as ‘stages of escalation of peripheral aims’ (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983) which have moved from integration petitions in the early years after independence to cultural demands in the 1970s and the final demand for political autonomy, broadly taken up after Mohammed VI took the throne in 1999.

Before the beginning of the new king’s reign, certain regionalist awareness groups consolidated in the Rif’s social and political realms, mainly thanks to the activity developed by Amazigh associations. These organizations were responsible for reintroducing the regionalist debate through a renewed interest in organizing events and debates related to the historical past of the region and the recovery of Rifian heroes. The détente process that began in the early 1990s, in which the monarchy was trying to establish a stable path towards succession, opened a favourable opportunity structure at the meso level to introduce new social and political demands in the public sphere. However, this was not contrary to persistence of state’s surveillance over activism in the Rif. Notwithstanding, in spite of being banned or dispersed by the authorities, the associative work paved the way to the consolidation of the regionalist movement in the Rif that took place in the following decade and involved new generations in it.

### *The Political Realm in the Rif under Mohammed VI: Co-optation and Changes in Centre–Periphery Relations*

The accession of Mohammed VI to the Moroccan throne introduced changes in the opportunity structure in the Rif, in both its socio-economic and political dimensions, opening new scenarios, spaces and means to interact with the central power. It was in the reign of Mohammed VI that the feeling of economic and political isolation was partly transformed as a redefinition of centre–periphery relations was initiated. Thus, Mohammed VI attempted to bring an end to the bitterness between the monarchy and the population in the Rif and to stabilize his legitimacy in the territory by renewing the social contract between the Makhzen and the region through three principal measures: manifold development plans,<sup>2</sup> the monarch’s symbolic personal closeness to the Rif, exemplified by frequent trips to the region,<sup>3</sup> and the co-optation of new Rifian elites. Nevertheless, this latter issue has become a double-edged sword for both the regime and the new elites, as has been revealed in the course of popular protests.

The integration of new Rifian elites into state circles of power is related to Mohammed VI’s great ability since his accession to preserve and even enhance his monopoly over the exercise of political and economic power in the country (Boukhars, 2010). To that end, different processes of political deactivation have been undertaken which the Moroccan regime has used to better control the political process as a whole and dissident forces in particular (Catusse, 2002; Sater, 2010; Hibou, 2011). Some of the strategies adopted have included the technocratization of politics, the co-optation of groups in civil society through governmental and semi-governmental institutions and financing the activities of selected associations, as

well as the marginalization of the government and parliament as policymakers. All these political manoeuvrings have been frequently employed in Moroccan history to drive the organization of internal pluralism from above (Ojeda & Suárez, 2015). Nevertheless, their use has been increased during Mohammed VI's reign since they align with the monarch's preference for technocratic government and his idea of authority: an executive monarchy that governs and controls the limit of what is politically permissible (Ojeda & Suárez, 2015).

Notwithstanding the resilience of the Moroccan authoritarian system, some changes have occurred in Moroccan political life, especially the greater freedom of civil society to organize itself and operate in the public arena (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010). Social and political actors have seized these new opportunities to create associations and initiatives that have not only been targets of repression, but have also created a distance between the traditional forms of representation and the way politics is practised now (Catusse, 2002; Desrues, 2005). Thus, associations currently provide an alternative channel for political participation and for expressing preferences for new political ideas and values that the Moroccan political system did not previously represent (Desrues, 2005). Nevertheless, the consolidation of associations as a new form of doing politics has generated a paradoxical situation given that these associations have become platforms to implement not only different strategies of contestation, but also to be a means of potential co-optation or accommodation in the social and political realm with which to legitimize mediation and negotiation with local authorities and peers (Suárez, 2013a). Both functions of these new associations have played an important role in the transformations in the Rif's political realm in the last decade, especially in the frame of the monarch's initiatives for reconciliation and regionalization. Both processes have encouraged Rifian civil society and local elites to establish their positions as peripheral stakeholders and have constituted important parts of the inner workings of the development of the regionalist movement in the Rif.

The national initiative for reconciliation and the institution responsible for accomplishing that task, the Equity and Reconciliation Instance (IER), encouraged Rifian civil society to co-ordinate and establish a common stance among local political forces and activists through a multi-political force platform, the Rif Declaration Committee (CDR). Rif–state reconciliation was a sensitive point within the process at state level, so leading the regional reconciliation project became a means to achieve and exert a mediating role in centre–periphery relations (Suárez, 2013a). Despite the fact that the committee's activity ceased due to internal differences, certain sectors of Rifian civil society, which had been part of the committee, integrated into central Moroccan circles of power as secondary elites.<sup>4</sup> They occupied posts in some para-state institutions and formed new national associations in Rabat, from which they contributed to the formation of the Movement for All Democrats, later the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), created by Fouad Ali El Himma, the king's closest friend (Suárez, 2013a). The PAM, which received the most votes in the Al Hoceima province in the 2009 legislative elections,<sup>5</sup> has served as a platform for developing a moderated regionalism within the system for these regional elites (Suárez, 2013a).<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the CDR was also an important forum in terms of preparing the ground for the creation of outside pressure groups and for fostering a new regionalist debate, as did the so-called 'Rif Declaration' (2005). The declaration contained a series of demands considered essential for achieving real reconciliation with the past between the central power and the Rif, including an apology from the state for its repressive practices committed against the Rif population, economic reparation of victims, respect and recognition of the region's political, social and cultural rights, as well as a comprehensive development plan to stop the deliberate economic marginalization of the region.<sup>7</sup>

The IER's final report was strongly rejected by large sectors of the Moroccan opposition, including the CDR, which was dissatisfied with the limited attention given to the Rif (Suárez, 2013a). The report did, however, expose the need for regional agency and an evolving mobilization structure in the Rif. Opportunities for such agency were opened up by the presentation of the Moroccan initiative for Western Saharan autonomy and the king's declared interest in reforming the regional model in 2007. Both factors increased the number and widened the type of actors involved in the regionalist debate.

The regionalist movement in the Rif, according to the study by Belghazi and Madani (2001) on collective action in Morocco, is made up of formal organizations, informal networks and unaffiliated individuals engaged in a more or less coherent struggle which aims to consolidate the movement's position in the regional political and social realm. Its principal target is the recovery of some degree of autonomy over regional political life to protect its cultural legacy and identity, with demands ranging from advanced regionalization to a federal state or an autonomous region, with the latter being the most widely supported, not least since it is a term used by Morocco in its plan for Western Sahara. It is also the core demand of the Movement for the Autonomy of the Kabylie (MAK), the model and inspiration for those Rifian activists who constitute the Movement for the Autonomy of the Rif (MAR), the most popular group among Rifian youth (Suárez, 2010, 2013a).

Regionalist actors mainly came from the associative milieu and certain political parties and trade unions at the regional level,<sup>8</sup> other Amazigh associations and platforms at the national level,<sup>9</sup> and some activist groups from the Rifian diaspora.<sup>10</sup> They are characterized by their 'cross-militancy', that is, their multiple commitment and simultaneous participation in different organizations (political parties, associations or trade unions).<sup>11</sup> This particularity has produced ideological or programmatic clashes between local sections and their national branches in some political organizations, inasmuch as, in certain cases, they established alliances that do not follow the logic and dynamics of the policies adopted by those organizations at state level.

A second window of opportunity for Rif activism opened in January 2010 with the formation of the Consultative Commission for Regionalization (CCR), which increased the interest in the regionalism debate in the Rif and spurred the creation of a new organization, the Northern Morocco Forum for Human Rights (FDHNM). This new structure has been something of a continuation of the CDR, and its fundamental target – the creation of a regional political organization – challenged



the expressed prohibition of regional parties by Moroccan law. This goal was already pursued by the CDR and the MAR (Suárez, 2013a).

Most of the actors and organizations involved in regional activism have neither clearly articulated the polity of their regionalist projects,<sup>12</sup> nor provided a clear territorial definition of regional borders.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, they do share certain aims, such as the creation of a regional political organization to represent regional rights and interests and to exert political pressure on the central power. The establishment of an autonomous entity is considered the only way to solve the Rif's underdevelopment and social and economic deficits and to guarantee the full exercise of the region's democratic rights.<sup>14</sup>

Among all regionalist groups operating in the Rif, only the MAR has developed a structured political blueprint, proposing a complete regional administrative organization with a presidency, parliament, government and judicial system and a detailed distribution of powers between the state and the Rif autonomous region, establishing Rifian as the official language in the region (Suárez, 2010, 2013a).<sup>15</sup>

Even though neither the FDHNM nor the MAR have been legalized by the Moroccan authorities, both have been allowed to operate in a restricted environment, being monitored and pressured by the authorities (Suárez, 2013a). This has permitted them to shape discourses, which have progressively penetrated the young local population, as could be seen during the course of popular protest in Morocco to which this article will now turn.

### **The 'Autonomist Spring' in the Rif within Popular Protest in Morocco**

The population and associations in the Rif joined the protests in Morocco, taking ownership of the grievances expressed and participating actively in the first wave of mobilization. But as the cycle of protests progressed, new and specific demands started to emerge in the region related to its political, economic and social particularities. As occurred in other territories, such as the Western Sahara, as shown in Irene Fernandez's article in this special issue, in the Rif, contention underwent a progressive localization in terms of demands, with a focus on political-territorial demands, as well as in terms of mobilization and collective action patterns, which included a cycle of violent confrontation with the security forces and symbolic defiance of the pillars of the Moroccan state.

Moroccan protests began on 20 February 2011 in a march that was organized by a group of young Moroccans using social networks, who, inspired by the uprisings across the region, decided to take to the streets to denounce the country's situation and demand changes in the country's political, economic and social spheres.<sup>16</sup> The Rifian population joined the mobilizers because the general feeling was that the uprisings in neighbouring countries had opened a window of opportunity to demand change, as a Rifian Amazigh activist declared to the author: 'It is a moment in which we are not afraid of demanding things' (Interview I).

The so-called 'Day of Dignity' passed completely normally across the country except for some riots in northern Morocco, especially in the Rif, as well in other places, such as Sefrou, Marrakech and Guelmine. The first day of protests in the Rif



mobilized between 10,000 (according to certain digital media, such as *Mamfakinch*) and 50,000 people (according to the data estimated by the organizers, the M20F) (López, 2011). Whilst demonstrations in Nador developed peacefully, violent clashes took place in the Al Hoceima province, which ended with the burning of several institutional buildings, the headquarters of the Istiqlal (PI) and PAM parties, two bank offices and a hotel – without any police intervention.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, there were 38 arrests on the evening of 20 February and five bodies were found inside one burnt bank. The scant and contradictory official information about the situation in which the bodies were found and the authorities' refusal to open an investigation increased people's outrage, as testimonies circulated which corroborated the practice of illegal detention and torture in the Al Hoceima police station on the night of 20 February and during the following days.<sup>18</sup>

The incidents that occurred on 20 February were a watershed in the development of protest in the Rif. On the one hand, the intense unrest caused old local political conflicts to reappear and so also brought the issue of co-optation to the fore. New political elites, such as Ilyas El Omari,<sup>19</sup> became an issue in the protests. For part of the Rifian population and protesters in other parts of the country, he represented the parallel government of advisers, friends and palatial technocracy that controls or directly promotes all major decisions within the government, leading to the vast system of looting and favours available to those closest to the palace (Cohen & Jaidi, 2006; Desrues & López, 2008; Liddell, 2010). In this vein, a local leftist activist stated that the 20 February violent clashes in Al Hoceima had been fuelled by 'local groups opposed to the control that the PAM had over the Rif' (Interview II). Meanwhile, for other sectors, El Omari was part of the core that had approached the Rif and the monarchy, had created a Rifian lobby within the system and, via the PAM, had benefited from having some informal authority, which allowed his entourage to exercise political influence and pressure on certain areas of the country's political realm. Following this argument, a supporter of the PAM asserted to the author: 'The king is always here since 1999 and he has a great success every time he comes. Without the Rifian political lobby the reconciliation with the Palace had not occurred' (Interview III).

On the other hand, a particular pattern of contention appeared in the region after 20 February, in part derived from the horizontal and decentralized structure of the M20F (Suárez, 2013b), formed by day-to-day improvisation (Desrues, 2012), and in part from the 'defensive reaction–offensive action' strategy adopted by protesters in the Rif. This latter tactical approach was embraced by protesters as a means to respond to local events, the state's treatment of protest in the Rif and to challenge the central power with new forms of resistance. The 20 February turmoil triggered new demonstrations across the region, in both urban and rural areas, over the following days,<sup>20</sup> aimed at denouncing the violent clashes, reaffirming their commitment to the M20F's demands, condemning the death of the five young men – who became honoured 'martyrs of the M20F in the Rif'<sup>21</sup> – and demanding investigations into the crime. This response resulted in an increase in the number of police and army forces deployed in the region, prompting new confrontations between the population and security troops. Through this militarization, old centre–periphery tensions and

resentments reappeared on both sides, encouraging civil society in Al Hoceima to mobilize and adopt common positions to de-escalate the situation while insisting on local demands. These included putting a halt to pressuring and monitoring activists and the intimidation and insulting of the population. The 'lack of ethics and commitment of security forces in their relationship with the citizens'<sup>22</sup> was lambasted, as was the 'lack of respect to the collective identity of the region and its national symbol, above all Abdelkrim Al Khattabi'.<sup>23</sup> Also demanded was a 'serious, responsible and impartial' investigation into the 20 February incidents and the liberation of all prisoners.<sup>24</sup>

On 4 April, 38 activists under arrest were freed in Al Hoceima and ten days later Chakib Al Khayari, the well-known president of the Rif Association for Human Rights, who had been imprisoned for denouncing drug smuggling and corruption in northern Morocco, was given a reprieve.<sup>25</sup> These measures were too few and too late to calm tensions. Individual confrontations between local and security forces intensified and ancient sensitivities came to the fore.<sup>26</sup> New types of regionalist resistance on the everyday level emerged, such as demonstrations in front of the police headquarters and threats to renounce Moroccan national identity if members of the security forces involved in the altercation remained unpunished.<sup>27</sup>

Between the summer of 2011 and the end of the year, other forms of collective action developed whilst tensions continued to rise and the army gathered in the interior areas of the Rif. Meanwhile, the cycle of protest was declining in the rest of the country. M20F local committees in Ait Bouayach, Imzouren and Driouch started to organize strikes against maintenance services, sit-ins in squares, blocking roads and boycotting the payment of electricity bills.<sup>28</sup> Rifian university students, looking for innovative forms of protest, also incorporated other grassroots activities which also increased their visibility and impact abroad, such as the march organized from Nador to Melilla to apply for political asylum in Spain and protest against the Moroccan state's Arabization policy.<sup>29</sup>

By autumn 2011, protests in Morocco had lost their initial homogeneity, and the demands and methods of Rifian protests differed from those adopted by the M20F at state level. They had acquired their own independent character, which contributed to making contestation in the Rif increasingly local. Demands addressed to the central power and local authorities included the end of the marginalization and exclusion of the Rifian population, improvement of health services, education and living conditions, acceptance of local cultural identity, as well as improvements to services and infrastructure – for example, the sewerage system, street lighting and refuse collection and the extension of the electricity grid and potable water system at the local level.<sup>30</sup> Demands and activities reverted to prior policies of contention, and protesters viewed their situation through the lens of old centre–periphery tensions, looking back to the militarization of the popular uprisings that occurred in the Rif in the late 1950s and mid-1980s, when there was 'a fierce siege, a bloody military retaliation and repression in the form of impoverishment and marginalization, displacement and deprivation [in the region]'.<sup>31</sup>

This localization of contestation reached its zenith in spring 2012 when protests in villages in the interior were radicalized, especially in Ait Bouayach, where the

political and social demands of both activists and the population were focused on the situation generated by local protests<sup>32</sup> and local living conditions.<sup>33</sup> This radicalization of protests at the local level was accompanied by a withdrawal from the national political sphere. The Rif had one of the lowest levels of participation in the national legislative elections in 2011, which reflected the peripheral dissatisfaction that had accumulated in the region during the previous months.<sup>34</sup>

*Regionalism after Regionalization in the Rif: The Strengthening of Regional Political Identity and Collective Action*

The final draft of the advanced regionalization project was made public on 9 March 2011, and whilst it went largely unnoticed by most political actors and became a policy of secondary interest at the state level, it reactivated the debate over the territorial model and the autonomist aspirations of certain sectors of Rifian activism.

The territorial reform created a region basically built around economic criteria, focused on achieving integrated development in the regions, but without giving the population greater political independence from the central power. The project maintained the unitary nature of the system, did not legalize the constitution of regional parties, and the territorial demarcation it proposed did not accord with any of the regionalist movement's territorial projects for the Rif (Ojeda & Suárez, 2015).

From April, both the regionalist groups, especially the MAR and the FDHNM, and the local sections of the M20F organized meetings and events to protest against the reform, and demands for autonomy in the Rif were introduced as part of general demands for political change in Morocco.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as a means of protesting and reaffirming regional interest, the MAR announced in April 2011 the creation of its own political party, the Rifian Party for Solidarity, a decision also taken regarding internal differences within the organization, which tried to convince diaspora branches, which were reluctant to constitute a regional party without any prior unification of regionalist currents (Suárez, 2013a). According to this logic, the MAR co-ordinated meetings to establish a new Rifian multi-political force, despite the difficulty of integrating the PAM, something that was not accepted by all the regionalist stakeholders.<sup>36</sup> No decision was taken after two separate meetings, but the MAR achieved a greater capacity for dialogue and communication with local institutional powers (Suárez, 2013a).

The prohibition of regionalist parties also encouraged younger sectors of the population to take part in the protests, and in April they announced their intention to set up the Party of Nationalist Rifian Youth (Suárez, 2013a). That reinforced regional resistance to the Moroccan political system and the extension of regionalist demands among young people. The Rifian youth turned into the main driving force behind the symbolic challenges to the state through collective action. Their activities ranged from holding meetings with the image of Abdelkrim Al Khattabi instead of the ubiquitous portrait of the monarch – which far from being considered anecdotal by the authorities generated great nervousness among them<sup>37</sup> – to Rifian youth

waving the Republic of the Rif flag in demonstrations. In particular, the flag waving has had an important effect on politics in the region since it appeared on 16 October in the course of a demonstration in Ait Bouayach, when it was seen as an act of courage both by other activists in the region and the diaspora.<sup>38</sup>

After that date, the presence of the Republic of the Rif flag in demonstrations and meetings has increased and spread to other Rifian locations and the diaspora, and a former government building from the times of the Republic of the Rif was taken over during the course of a youth march from rural areas to Al Hoceima city on 7 March 2012 (Suárez, 2013a). Once a complete taboo in the public sphere in the region, the flag emerged within the cycle of contention as a symbol that reinforced the identity of protest in the Rif and the regional political demands to the central power and expressed regional dissatisfaction with the results of the constitutional reform and the new territorial policy. For the banner-waving Rifian youth, the flag represented not only an expression of communitarian identity, but also their political commitment outside the traditional channels and values of the Moroccan political system.

During spring 2012, the protest and clashes between the population and security forces increased again in interior villages – especially Ait Bouayach, but also in Imzouren and Boukidam – which remained under curfew for weeks.<sup>39</sup> During that time, the army and police made arrests and regional courts imposed more prison sentences on protesters, despite the wave of solidarity with the Rif both within and outside Morocco,<sup>40</sup> including the M20F national co-ordinator, expressing support for local protesters in the Rif during protests.<sup>41</sup>

Regional defiance of the central authority drew a harsh response from the state. Harsh penalties were imposed on 24 youth protesters from Ait Bouayach, including on those who demanded autonomy for the Rif and waved the Republic of the Rif flag during the local uprisings.<sup>42</sup> From that moment onwards, the level of confrontation between protesters and security forces was restricted to critical junctures, mainly related to the commemoration of historical events important in Rifian collective memory, such as the official celebration of the Annual Battle on 21 July 2013.<sup>43</sup>

The radicalization of protest towards a regionalist tendency that occurred during the cycle of contention was favoured by the opportunity structure in the region in a twofold way. On the one hand, the state tried to control the level of repression in order to maintain its ‘state of exceptionalism’ within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. On the other hand, the mobilizers counted on important resources to activate the population, especially the use of sympathizers to support the regionalist demands, primarily the young population, who had adhered to the regionalist debate, in both online and offline public spheres, during recent years (Suárez, 2013a).

### **The Aftermath of Popular Protests in the Rif: Outcomes and Conclusions**

The evolution of popular protest in the Rif has important subjective and objective outcomes. The objective outcomes have been minor, but it is necessary to mention

the state's decision to implement the IER's recommendation of creating a museum recording the Rif's material and non-material heritage and regional history. This initiative can be viewed as a central power's awareness that reconciliation between the Rif and the state is not final, and its transitional justice policy remains limited.<sup>44</sup>

Concerning subjective outcomes, the most noteworthy point is the end of the perception of threat among the Rifian public regarding its commitment to regionalist activism, above all among local youth which – as other articles in this volume also show – has been politicized and activated by the Arab Spring. Young people have mobilized more than ever in favour of regionalist demands, even from outside the regionalist organizations and groups that had been operating before the protests started. A regional sense of belonging among Rifian youth has been further promoted by the way in which protests developed in the region. Being – and standing up for being – Rifian in Morocco now represents a new form of political commitment. It also constitutes a commitment to a social project and a source of new cultural codes and is associated with a set of values including authenticity, citizenship, modernity and democracy. Thus, as Irene Fernández argues in her contribution to this issue, the Arab Spring protests have strengthened and crystalized local feelings of identity.

Moreover, the regionalist mobilization structures have also become denser and more diverse, including the diaspora, whose implication in the regionalism debate has also increased, encouraging the formation of new regionalist groups, such as the Rif Independence Movement.<sup>45</sup> This organization has been working on establishing new alliances with pro-self-determination and independence pressure groups and parties abroad, such as the National Liberal Party and Nations without States, through meetings such as that organized in Roosendaal on 30 November 2013.<sup>46</sup>

It follows from this article that the peripheries have contributed in a distinct way to popular protests, showing their own tempos and features. Political contention in the Rif has presented its own particularities in terms of space, time, substance, strategies and actors. In contrast to what occurred in other parts of Morocco, such as the High Atlas (see Bergh & Rossi-Doria, 2015), urban and rural populations have participated in popular demonstrations in the Rif, being even stronger and more radical in the rural and interior areas. In these parts of the region different strategies from those used in the cities were adopted, such as violent actions against representative spaces of central authority and security forces, economic boycott and symbolic challenges to the state's unity.

Protest in the Rif, still ongoing, has been mired by the existence of previously established mobilizing structures which provided the region with its own opportunity structure and resources to be an independent actor within the contention. The prior emergence of a regional political space was critical in the development of protest in the Rif and in the progressive localization of demands and modes of resistance. This has encouraged the incorporation of new types of socialized participants into the regionalist movement. These activists have also readjusted the repertoire of collective action and mobilization patterns, contributing to the consolidation of regional identity as a politicized identity and to regionalist discourse as a political project in the regional political realm.

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## Notes

1. The Makhzen has been described by Cavatorta and Durac (2010: 57) as an 'informal governing alliance between the monarch, his advisers, selected businessmen, high-ranking bureaucrats and tribal chiefs operating as the unelected and unaccountable decision-makers in the country beyond the control of the elected government'.
2. Development plans and agencies have been central in the state's strategy for territorial reinforcement and functioned as a cornerstone of Mohammed VI's approach to the Rif, where the promotion of economic development has been implemented via a large number of projects to activate the regional economy and unlock the region from the rest of Morocco geographically. The monarch has personally followed the evolution of this development programme, visiting the Rif on a frequent basis for both official visits and personal holidays (Suárez, 2011).
3. Because of the continuity of his presence in the region, the local population has started to view the king as a bulwark there, breaking the barrier between the northern provinces and the Makhzen that existed for decades (Suárez, 2011, 2013a).
4. For Parejo and Feliu (2009), 'secondary elites' are made up of secondary figures of the army and intelligence services, state agents in charge of the machinery of repression, members of para-state institutions, the government, leaders of political parties and parliamentary elites, administration elites, businessmen and certain members of the media.
5. Detailed information about the constitution process of the PAM in the Rif, its electoral strategies and results in Al Hoceima province can be found in Suárez (2009).
6. For more about the participation of Rifian political elites in the constitution of the PAM, see Suárez (2013a).
7. 29 يناير 2005: فيلجنة الريف لجنّة إعلان 2005. See Suárez (2013a).
8. Despite the fact that Amazigh associations represent the core of regionalist activism, other local associations have also been integrated, such as local development associations and the so-called associations of memory as well as the local sections of the AMDH and UMT (Suárez, 2010, 2013a).
9. The Amazigh sectors in favour of the establishment of autonomy or federalized entities in Amazigh regions are the Amazigh Cultural Movement in Moroccan universities and some political organizations linked to Amazigh activism, such as the Amazigh Democratic Party, the Moroccan Amazigh Democratic Party and the Federal Democratic Party (Suárez, 2010, 2013a).
10. Amazigh associations in Spain, Belgium, Holland and Germany, the European branch of the MAR and associations of Rifians abroad in different European cities (Suárez, 2013a).
11. See the example of Annahj Addimocrati's section in Al Hoceima in Suárez (2013a).
12. However, an 'ethno-territorial mimesis' was observed in some of these projects with the political systems of certain European countries, especially those with important Rifian communities, such as Spain, Germany and Belgium. These communities have contributed to diffusing the particularities of the political systems where they live (Suárez, 2010, 2013a). For clarification, 'ethno-territorial mimesis' refers to the way that certain regions try to imitate the model of the state-region relationship, powers, institutions and symbols previously adopted by others (Moreno, 1997).
13. Proposals fluctuate from the territory defined as the 'Greater Rif' (from the Atlantic to the Algerian border and from the Mediterranean to the Rif Mountains), to the area considered as the 'Strategic Rif' (territory formed by the Al Hoceima, Driouch and Nador provinces along with certain parts of Taza and Berkane and Melilla) (See Suárez, 2010, 2013a).
14. In this respect, the political discourse rests on the consideration of the Rif as a nation, the idea that history has provided the Rifians with a democratic consciousness and its existence as a region with a historical identity and rights. It defies the ideological state apparatus sustaining the Arab and Islamic nationalist character of the modern nation-state, its policies and the dominant historiography of Morocco (Suárez, 2013a).



15. The MAR political project has been analysed through different documents issued by the organization, such as 'Le Rif stratégique' (2008), 'حركة سياسية ريفية' (2009) and 'Communiqué pour une large autonomie dans le Rif' (2008) (see Suárez, 2013a).
16. The reform of the constitution, the resignation of the Abbas Al Fassi government, the dissolution of parliament, an effective separation of powers, the prosecution of persons and authorities responsible for human rights abuses and corruption, the liberation of political prisoners, the official recognition of Amazigh language and identity and sanitary and education equality.
17. 'Une enquête au pays de Khattabi', *Mamfakinch*, 22 July 2011. Available at <http://www.mamfakinch.com/une-enquete-au-pays-de-khattabi/> (accessed 22 July 2011).
18. 'Más pruebas acusan a la policía marroquí de la muerte de 5 personas el 20 de febrero en Alhucemas', *Kaos en la red*, 11 April 2011. Available at <http://old.kaosenlared.net/noticia/mas-pruebas-acusan-policia-marroqui-muerte-5-personas-20-febrero-alhuc> (accessed 2 May 2011).
19. Ilyas El Omari had been one of the Rifian activists who led the Rif Declaration Committee and has political experience in the GSU and local and national associations.
20. New mass demonstrations took place on 21 February in Imzouren, with the participation of 7,000 people and on 25 February across the Al Hoceima province with 10,000 participants. Rifian youth organized their own gatherings both in the secondary schools in Imzouren, Ait Bouayach and Ajdir on 23 February and at Oujda University where Rifian students received the support of all sections of the UNEM. See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=ulvuBQ3gcbw#t=0s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ulvuBQ3gcbw#t=0s); [http://asenti.blogspot.com.es/2011/02/blog-post\\_22.html](http://asenti.blogspot.com.es/2011/02/blog-post_22.html) and 'أحداث الحسيمة تساهم في توطيد وحدة Rif', *Dalil Rif*, 22 February 2011. Available at <http://www.dalil-rif.com/home/-hoceimaunemoujda> (accessed 22 February 2011).
21. 'بيان ساكنة أيت بوعياش تستمر في مسيرات النضالية بعد 20 فبراير و بلاغ لحركة 20 فبراير موقع تماسينت' (Statements of local associations in Ait Bouyach and Tamassint) (see Suárez, 2013a).
22. 'الحسيمة إقليم الهيئات والفعاليات الشبابية ب' (statement of organizations and youth of Al Hoceima province), 8 March 2011.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. 'Chakib El Khayari libéré', *Bladi*, 14 April 2011. Available at <http://www.bladi.net/chakib-el-khayari-libere.html> (accessed 11 April 2011).
26. In this context, two remarkable events took place at the beginning of the summer when, first, on 13 June, a policeman, after attacking a taxi driver with a bladed weapon, uttered insults toward Rifians, including *aubach*, the word Hassan II had used to refer to the Rif population after the 1984 uprisings and 'sons of Spaniards'. Some days later, other policeman attacked and insulted four young men who were participating in a popular demonstration. The local population reacted in both cases by organizing protests, resulting in increased tension with the security forces and the ending of the king's visit to the region. See 'مدينة الحسيمة وسط احتجاج ليلية', *Hespress*, 14 June 2011. Available at <http://hespress.com/permalink/32901.html> (accessed 15 June 2011). 'مواطينين يشعلون غضبا ساكنة', *Rifnow*, 13 June 2011. Available at [http://www.rifnow.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3214%3A2011-04-13-15-07-04&catid=39%3A2009-04-12-16-06-34&Itemid=87](http://www.rifnow.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3214%3A2011-04-13-15-07-04&catid=39%3A2009-04-12-16-06-34&Itemid=87) (accessed 15 June 2011).
27. 'Miles de manifestantes colapsan el centro de la ciudad marroquí de Alhucemas', *Alhucemas Press*, 15 June 2011. Available at [http://www.alhucemaspress.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2134:miles-de-manifestantes-colapsan-el-centro-de-la-ciudad-marroqui-de-alhucemas&catid=36:noticias-del-rif&Itemid=126](http://www.alhucemaspress.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2134:miles-de-manifestantes-colapsan-el-centro-de-la-ciudad-marroqui-de-alhucemas&catid=36:noticias-del-rif&Itemid=126) (accessed 15 June 2011).
28. 'ساكنة أيت بوعياش تستجيب للاضراب العام ومسيرة توحيد مطالب', *Central Committee Ait Bouayach*, 22 May 2011. Available at <http://bouayach-comite.blogspot.com/es/> (accessed 20 April 2012); 'على إهانتهم لكرامة المحتجين', *Rifnow*, 29 June 2011. Available at [http://www.rifnow.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3276:2011-06-24-18-45-15&catid=39:2009-04-12-16-06-34&Itemid=87](http://www.rifnow.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3276:2011-06-24-18-45-15&catid=39:2009-04-12-16-06-34&Itemid=87) (accessed 1 July 2011).
29. See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=D\\_OBZAVIzUk#t=126s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=D_OBZAVIzUk#t=126s).
30. Tamsunt n twengint n Arif gi Lhusima (Statement of Association of Rif Memory), Al Hoceima, 7 March 2011.



31. Ibid.
32. E.g. the immediate demilitarization of the area, the release of all detainees and political prisoners, the suspension of arrest warrants against the militants who had not been arrested and investigation into corruption at City Hall. See ساكنة ايت بو عياش تستجيب للاضراب العام ومسيرة حاشدة تطالب Bouayach Comite, 22 May 2011. Available at <http://bouayach-comite.blogspot.com.es/> (accessed 20 April 2012).
33. E.g. the transformation of the local health centre into a hospital, the rehabilitation of irrigation canals, installing fences on the banks of the Nekor and Souftoula rivers and the cancellation of electricity and water payments for two years in compensation for abuses committed. See ساكنة ايت بو عياش تستجيب للاضراب العام ومسيرة حاشدة تطالب Bouayach Comite, 22 May 2011. Available at <http://bouayach-comite.blogspot.com.es/> (accessed 20 April 2012).
34. National participation in the constitutional referendum was 75 per cent of registered voters, and in the case of Al Hoceima city 55 per cent of registered voters. National participation in the legislative election was 45.5 per cent whilst in the Al Hoceima province it was 37.2 per cent, 41.2 per cent in Driouch and 33.9 per cent in Nador (Suárez, 2013a).
35. بيان صادر عن مجلس التنسيق في شأن مستجدات الوضع الحقوقي والديمقراطي والمغرب Human Rights, 3 December 2011.
36. الياس العماري يهدد بالحكم الذاتي للعودة إلى دائرة القرار بالبلاد Arrifinu, 24 May 2011. Available at <http://www.arrifinu.net/?p=46008> (accessed 26 May 2011).
37. Observed by the author in the course of a meeting organized by local section of M20F in Nador, 3 April 2011.
38. محتجون بنبينيو عياشير فعون لجمهورية الريف Maghress, 16 October 2011. Available at <http://www.maghress.com/dalilrif/5982> (accessed 16 October 2011).
39. 'Ce Rif si rebelle', Telquel, 24 April 2012. Available at <http://www.telquel-online.com/Le-mag/Reportage-ce-rif-si-rebelle/519> (accessed 2 May 2012).
40. 'Rassemblement de solidarité avec les populations du Rif victimes de la répression au Maroc', Tamazgha, 21 March 2012. Available at <http://tamazgha.fr/Rassemblement-de-solidarite-avec,3317.html> (accessed 3 April 2012). فعاليات ريفية تخلد فاتح ماي بمريد Midar 24, 1 May 2012. Available at <http://www.midar24.com/?p=5933> (accessed 3 June 2012).
41. Statement of National Council for Support of the Feb 20 Movement, Rabat, 12 March 2012 (distributed by e-mailing list Presse Maroc on 14 March 2012).
42. 'Duras penas de prisión contra militantes del 20F de Ait Bouayach', AlhucemasPress, 1 May 2012. Available at [http://www.alhucemaspress.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2496:duras-penas-de-prision-contra-militantes-del-20f-de-ait-bouayach-rif&catid=50:ultimas-noticias-slide-show](http://www.alhucemaspress.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2496:duras-penas-de-prision-contra-militantes-del-20f-de-ait-bouayach-rif&catid=50:ultimas-noticias-slide-show) (accessed 2 May 2012).
43. 'Les activistes Rifains réclament l'indépendance du Rif à l'occasion du 92e anniversaire de la bataille d'Anoual', Siwel, 23 September 2013. Available at [http://www.siwel.info/Maroc-Les-activistes-Rifains-reclament-l-independance-du-Rif-a-l-occasion-du-92e-anniversaire-de-la-bataille-d-Anoual\\_a5245.html](http://www.siwel.info/Maroc-Les-activistes-Rifains-reclament-l-independance-du-Rif-a-l-occasion-du-92e-anniversaire-de-la-bataille-d-Anoual_a5245.html) (accessed 12 October 2013).
44. 'Lancement du projet pour la création du musée du Rif en vue de promouvoir la réconciliation et de préserver le patrimoine de la région'. Available at <http://www.cndh.org.ma/fr/bulletin-d-information/lancement-du-projet-pour-la-creation-du-musee-du-rif-en-vue-de-promouvoir-la> (accessed 1 November 2014).
45. It was created in 2013 by Rifians in the diaspora, after the spring uprisings in rural areas and subsequent state repression. The organization's main concern is the Rif Republic's Self-Determination Cause. See <http://rif.livenations.net/> (accessed 19 November 2014).
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## Interviews

- Interview I, Amazigh activist, Al Hoceima, 7 April 2011.
- Interview II, leftist activist, Al Hoceima, 12 April 2011.
- Interview III, supporter of PAM, Al Hoceima, 8 April 2011.

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