

COMMENTARY



Five Years of Riffian Protests: We See No Difference

Five years ago, the Hirak protest movement broke out in the Moroccan Rif. Economically, the Rif region has not improved since then. Politically, however, the movement breathed new life into the area.

By Ellen Debackere and Yassin Akouh

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The dramatic death of fishmonger Mohsin Fikri, crushed by a garbage truck on October 28, 2016 in Al Hoceima, northern Morocco, was the immediate cause for the outbreak of the nonviolent Hirak protests, where Riffians cry out for good education, health care, jobs, fair justice, and an end to corruption. But the movement was met with repression, resulting in hundreds of arrests. The leaders of the Hirak movement were sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Riffians: Hirak Gave us Solidarity and Unity

Ellen Debackere

Five years later, protests have disintegrated; without leader Nasser Zefzafi, the movement has crumbled. But the discontent has not gone away – after all, nothing has come of the socio-economic questions incorporated the Hirak movement's bundle of demands, says Z.R.¹, a 35-year-old resident of Al Hoceima. A participant in the Hirak movement, he was detained for one year, nine months and four days. Before his arrest, he was a shopkeeper; today, he is unemployed. "After all these years we still don't see any improvement in our situation. Morocco says it is doing its best, but hospitals without adequate medical staff remain mere concrete buildings. The only thing the Hirak has given us is mutual solidarity. For the first time we have seen unity again in the Rif and the diaspora."

According to A.H.² (40) from Al Hoceima, the situation today has not improved. He too spent more than a year in prison after participating in several protest marches. "We see no difference. On the economic front, there is no progress, and today, activists are still locked up. It is very difficult to see the future brightly."

Second wave in independence

The Hirak movement is often seen as an offshoot of a post-Arab Spring era, but it is a process that has been going on for much longer. For decades, Riffians have felt politically, economically and culturally marginalized and discriminated against. The Arab uprisings of 2011 and the Hirak both build on a dynamic that has been going on for years – and will continue for years to come – if fundamental political and economic changes do not occur, says Professor Koen Bogaert of the Middle East and North Africa Research Group at the University of Ghent.³ "Although little may have changed on the ground, the Hirak was once again able to demonstrate the crisis in Morocco. In this sense, the movement has helped build a growing political consciousness in Morocco and a culture of protest. This makes it harder to ignore the problems there. Among the political elite a fear exists that the current political calm is very fragile."

To ensure some of that calm, the Moroccan state said it had invested an amount worth more than 1.2 billion euros into the region since 2017. That money went to health care, education, road construction and more, and – according to the government – has led to unprecedented development.

According to researcher Soraya El Kahlaoui at the University of Ghent⁵. Morocco may have deployed a number of technical solutions to tackle development such as constructing hospitals, but the government has still not launched a peace process with the region. "Proof of that is the fact is that the leaders of the protest movement are still locked up. A reconciliation process will not be possible until the political prisoners are released. Nor does the state offer answers to more difficult questions, such as addressing competing claims of land ownership. "

Still, the Hirak has also set a positive precedent. "For the first time, a social movement was able to politicize socioeconomic demands and got national and international attention for it, and the movement also transcended the elitist middle classes. I therefore call it the second wave in Morocco's independence."

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Hirak-activist Jamal Mouna: The Authority wants our Obedience without Meeting our Demands

Jamal Mouna (second from left) after a demonstration in the village of Tamassint on July 21, 2019. The three activists next to him also fled Morocco. © Yassin Akouh

Yassin Akouh

A set of demands for their neglected Rif region is quickly drawn up, comprising socio-economic and cultural demands. For months, people protest in the Rif, among them unemployed charismatic man: Nasser Zefzafi, who would later become the face of the protests and the Hirak. In May 2017, the state decides to intensify its crackdown. Hundreds of activists are arrested and sentenced to prison terms of twenty years each.

Jamal Mouna, ex-political prisoner and Hirak activist, speaks about the Riffian movement. Mouna, Zefzafi's companion and right-hand man in both the Hirak's protests and prison, looks back on five years of the Hirak from his exile in Spain. He fled Morocco after he became involved in a new court case and his family was harassed. Jamal Mouna is reflecting on the past and hoping for a more just future:

How do you look back at the past 5 years?

Five years have passed – it was a dark period for us. You saw arrests on the streets, which people will never forget. We returned to the dark times in history. You can't protest today, and the state has killed our economy. We used to live better. We want to progress and help our country. But the state is holding us back.

When Mohammed VI took office, it was said that he would be better than King Hassan II. But actually, he has followed in the same footsteps as his father. We see that under his policies, martyrs have also fallen and there is heavy-handed rule. There is no freedom.

Did you dare to think in the beginning that the state would react so harshly to the protests?

I already had my suspicions. The Allawite dynasty will not change. The king is an egoist, and according to his policies, only he is allowed to live. The king is the most important man in the country. That's why we addressed our demands to him right away, but he didn't take responsibility. He sent the political parties [instead], but our position was clear. We distrusted these parties and did not want to work with them. How we thought the state was going to react eventually came true. The state does not want us to demand our rights, but rather worship them.

Why did you decide to migrate to Europe?

I knew from the moment I spent two years in Oukacha prison in Casablanca. I was released in a negative atmosphere. Our area was under siege and we were oppressed. I could not stand this and remain silent. I could not continue to live in Morocco and preferred to die in a boat at sea. Those in power are even worse than our former colonizers. I have seen death when crossing into Europe. In our country, you have two options: silence or prison.

Do you have hope that Zefzafi and the other activists will be released early? Can the new government change that?

The state wants to release them, but only in their way. And the prisoners refuse to renounce their cause. The new government does say that they want to release the prisoners, but we know that nothing will come of it. Of course, there is a chance that the prisoners will be released, but only under certain conditions. We cannot trust the state. They are waiting for the leaders of the movement to sign a document acknowledging the [state's] complaints against them, that they wanted to establish their own state, for example, and cause the

destabilization of the Moroccan Kingdom. If they should ever protest or fight back, the state can bring up this document and present it to the people. They can also use this towards other countries: that everywhere, activists of the Hirak are guilty.

Yassin Akouh is a Belgian-Moroccan journalist specializing in the socio-political affairs of Morocco and the Rif (rural areas). Follow him on Twitter [@Yassin_Akouh](#).

Notes

[1] Interview, 22nd of October 2021

[2] Interview, 22nd of October 2021

[3] Interview, 22nd of October 2021

[4] E-mail, 23rd of October 2021

[5] Interview, 24th of October 2021

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