Morocco's Dual Strategy of Control

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Façade and Force: Morocco's Dual Strategy of Control

Introduction

Morocco has recently hosted the CAN and received favorable international commentary for its organization (Italpress, 2025). It is also set to co-organize the 2030 FIFA World Cup alongside Spain and Portugal. Beyond these largely positive media narratives, however, citizens' attitudes toward such developments diverge significantly. "Nous ne voulons pas de la Coupe du monde... la santé avant tout" ("We do not want the World Cup... health comes first"), and "Le peuple veut la fin de la corruption" ("The people want an end to corruption") have been among the slogans heard since September 2025 (Raissouni, 2025, p. 2). These sentiments have moved beyond abstraction and into the streets.

Since the 27th of that same month, a younger generation has mobilized to demand improved socio-economic conditions and a reorientation of state priorities toward the health and education sectors. Indeed, in 2025, unemployment rates reached 35.8% and 21.9% for the 15–24 and 25–34 age groups, respectively (Ibid).

These protests have come to be known as GENZ212, with "212" referring to Morocco's country code and "Gen Z" underscoring the generational character of this discontent. Notably, the movement originated on online platforms, particularly Discord.

Online-based organization, youth-led engagement, and demands for socio-economic reform closely mirror the very aspirations that defined the Arab Spring. The 2011 experience is no stranger to the North African country. Why, then, does a similar pattern appear to be re-emerging more than a decade later? Have these demands remained unmet, or have they been addressed in substance while persisting in altered forms? This article aims to examine how the Spring unfolded in Morocco, arguing that its dynamics are rooted in the very discontent citizens continue to experience fifteen years on.

February 20th

Morocco's encounter with the Arab Spring began on 20 February 2011, when between 150,000 and 200,000 protestors mobilised across more than fifty cities (Barany, 2013). Indeed, the scale was of great significance. The outcome, however, did not follow. Unlike Tunisia or Egypt, the movement did not escalate into regime-threatening unrest. The explanation lies not in the absence of grievances, but in how they were structured and how the central authority managed counter-reactions. To understand this response, it is necessary to return to the movement's very initial emergence.

The February 20th Movement (F20) was a product of its time. It emerged online, primarily through a Facebook group called Moroccans Converse with the King (Hamblin, 2015). Essentially, it adopted a decentralised, leaderless structure. This was a deliberate choice, again operating under similar movement strategies in Tunisia and Egypt. After all, avoiding hierarchy limited exposure to repression since there was no "leader" to be targeted. And so, making demands was smoother. The demands were the same as the original list posted on the "Freedom and Democracy Now" page, with the addition of two more: the recognition of the Berber language and the creation of an independent judiciary. After the list of demands, there was an additional section on the socioeconomic goals they hoped would be achieved through the implementation of political reforms. In other words, they believed that corrections to the political system would improve socio-economic conditions. The stated socioeconomic goals called for the integration of unemployed graduates into the public sector through transparent and fair competition and a dignified life for all, achieved in part through higher wages and access for the poor to public services (Benchemsi, 2012, p. 236).

However, this very same sporadic nature also undermined structural coherence. Local chapters were organised independently in cities across the country, their composition negotiated locally and determined by existing political forces. In Tangiers, for example, labour groups played a more significant role, while in Casablanca the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) helped younger activists organise, whereas in Marrakech there was no prominent political group involved (Benchemsi, 2012). What began as a call for constitutional reform quickly expanded into a broader platform: unemployment, corruption, public services, and regional inequalities (Benchemsi, 2012). The movement grew, but it also diluted itself; the already long list of national demands was further expanded by local chapters. For example, the Marrakech chapter focused on issues such as the forced relocation of four thousand families and inadequate local hospitals.

Moreover, the more actors joined, the less aligned they became. Political parties remained distant, and trade unions engaged selectively. Even "unfavourable" groups took part, such as the banned Islamist group Justice

and Charity (JC) (Macmillan, 2011). It therefore comes as no surprise that fragmentation was not a consequence of repression, it actually preceded it.

The regime recognised this early. As noted by Sean Yom and Gregory Gause, Moroccan authorities did not confront the movement head-on; they decomposed it (Yom & Gause, 2012, p. 79).

The monarchy realised that historically antagonistic groups had united early on, and therefore the campaign to demobilise the F20 targeted separate organisations, sometimes with clear success. For instance, the king's decision to pardon 146, mostly Islamist Salafist prisoners precipitated the end of organised Salafist involvement in the F20. Similarly, the early decision to engage with unions and concede to their demands removed a large sector of the population from potentially joining the movement (Badran, 2022, p. 7).

It is safe to say that "state violence was the political fulcrum of the Arab Spring" (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, 2015, p. 41). Within Morocco, however, repression did influence the F20, but reforms and concessions were the first tools used by the state.

The result was not the disappearance of grievances, but their displacement. The movement lost momentum, not relevance. Its demands were not resolved; they were rather absorbed into a process controlled by the state. This is what allowed the monarchy to transition from protest management to reform management without conceding structural change.

F20, therefore, should not be read as a failed uprising. It was a contained one. And its containment took the form of "flashy" reforms, we shall frame as a *façade*.

The Constitutional Façade

The monarchy's response to February 20th was immediate. On 9 March 2011, King Mohammed VI announced a constitutional reform process through the creation of a Royal Commission to review the country's constitution (Hill, 2019). The timing was not incidental. It came at a moment when mobilisation was still expanding, but not yet consolidated.

The king not only sought to assuage at least some of the demands being made by the 20 February Movement, but also to shift "the public debate away from the grievances on the street to the ... reforms that might be on the cards," thereby restoring "the monarchy and the parties" to the heart of the political process (Dalmasso & Cavatorta, 2013, p. 230). This worked. Once reform became the central topic, protest lost its monopoly over political momentum. The threat to the established order posed by the demonstrations was therefore curtailed, in part, by the king's timely intervention.

Furthermore, the 2011 constitution introduced seemingly significant changes. Parliamentary powers were expanded. The prime minister was to be drawn from the majority party. Judicial independence was formally recognised. Amazigh identity was constitutionally acknowledged (Hamblin,

2015). Taken together, these elements suggested movement toward a more democratic framework.

Yet, in practice, the distribution of power remained largely unchanged. The king retained decisive control over key institutions. He presides over the Council of Ministers, the security apparatus, and the judiciary. He appoints central political and judicial figures, including members of the Constitutional Court. He remains Commander of the Faithful (Kausch, 2009, p. 168).

To understand this dichotomy, one must first consider how top-down reforms in Morocco are not new and have historically been instrumentalised. Structural reforms in Morocco predate the Arab Spring. The kingdom had already transitioned, since the late 1990s, into a system combining electoral competition with concentrated executive authority. Current King Mohammed VI, son of Hassan II, ascended the throne in 1999 and initiated a large reform programme, mostly in the societal, economic, and legal spheres. In 1999, he created a reconciliation commission (the IER) where political prisoners and their families were heard, an initiative unique in the Arab world. In 2005, his government developed a nationwide human development initiative (the INDH), with substantial funding aimed at promoting and sustaining development. In 2003, the King called for a reform of Family Law (the Moudawana), which improved the status of women and expanded their rights, even if full equality was not achieved (Alaoui & Alessandri, 2011, p. 2).

This is where the façade operates. Reform addresses procedure, not structure. It may expand participation but remain conservative on redistributing authority. The system becomes more inclusive, yet not less controlled. This distinction explains why electoral change does not translate into political transformation.

The trajectory of the Justice and Development Party illustrates this. Its electoral victory in 2011 signalled a shift *within* the system, not *of* the system. Once in power, its room for manoeuvre remained constrained. The PJD, whose victory at the polls in 2011 signaled a new political era, was unsuccessful at exploiting the new powers and independence supposedly granted to the prime minister and parliament. The king held veto power over major decisions, and the political reality of coalition-building forced the PJD to ally with parties close to the palace to form a government. Cognizant of these constraints, the PJD consulted the palace on its appointments to different government posts (Zaaitar, 2012), despite this being legally unnecessary. Formal authority existed. Substantive autonomy did not.

The effect is cumulative. Each reform cycle generates expectations. Each cycle also contains them. Over time, the gap between institutional form and political reality becomes structural.

In Morocco, repression during the Arab Spring was neither constant nor excessive. It was selective. Security forces intervened at specific moments: when protests risked regaining momentum, when mobilisation declined,

and when visibility could be controlled. The first major mobilisation on 20 February 2011 saw tens of thousands of protestors across Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, and other cities (Champion, 2011). Initial policing remained relatively restrained. This shifted quickly. On the second day of protests, smaller gatherings were dispersed with greater ease. Participation had already declined, and this reduction shaped the state response. It suggests that mobilisation, not repression alone, determined the intensity of coercion. One can say that the regime was not reacting uniformly; it was calibrating. A month later, on 13 March, the pattern became clearer. Several hundred demonstrators in Casablanca were broken up with batons, marking the most violent intervention since the start of the movement (Reuters Africa, 2011).

Nevertheless, these episodes remained contained overall. This was deliberate, as Jason Brownlee notes. Even if state violence was central across the region (Brownlee et al., 2015, p. 41), Morocco diverged in how it applied it. The objective was not to overwhelm the movement, but to discipline it.

At the same time, it goes without saying that the regime reinforced its coercive capacity. Defence spending increased in the years following 2011. In 2011, the year in which the Arab Spring first began in Morocco, it spent $101.7 per head of population on its armed forces. In 2012, it increased this amount to $102.1 before committing $120.2 in 2013 and $118.0 in 2014. These increases meant that defence spending formed a greater share of total government expenditure than ever before. In both 2011 and 2012, 9.8 per cent of government outlay went to the armed forces, rising to 11.6 per cent in 2013 and 11.2 per cent in 2014 (SIPRI, 2015).

Repression followed concession. By the time force was applied, the movement had already been weakened, fragmented internally and reduced externally through co-optation. This sequencing, we esteem, is what made repression effective.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring did not fail in Morocco. It was managed. The regime absorbed the shock through a combination of reform and repression. This is visible in what followed through the rise of the Islamist party, Justice and Development Party (JDP). Worthy to note that its decline, 10 years later, revealed these very limits. Electoral participation increased; however, political capacity did not follow. In other words, the government operated within constraints they could not alter.

The transition toward the National Rally of Independents did not change this. Policy orientation shifted toward economic liberalisation and investment. Socio-economic pressures remained. Youth unemployment, inequality, and declining public services persisted. The figures observed in 2025 are not new — they accumulate through a core dynamic, one

where reform raises expectations, but structural constraints limit delivery. Discontent then re-emerges, and the cycle resumes.

GENZ212 fits within this pattern. Its form is contemporary: digital, decentralised, youth-led, its substance, however, is not. The slogans heard in 2025 echo those of 2011: corruption, public services, and socio-economic dignity. What has changed is not what is demanded, but how often it must be demanded.

The Arab Spring in Morocco did not end. It was contained. Its dynamics remain. And as long as the gap between reform and reality persists, its reappearance, in new forms, through new actors, should not be unexpected.

Bibliography

Timeline

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