Chapter 5

Morocco – Digital and social media promote youth citizen engagement in democracy

Karima Rhanem

Since 2011, when Morocco's King Mohammed VI announced a series of constitutional reforms in response to the protests led by Moroccan youth on 20 February, there have been a number of initiatives by youth and civil society actors to promote citizen engagement via a mix of offline and digital platforms. This chapter explores how young Moroccan activists and civil society actors used the internet and social networks to mobilise, debate and advocate change. It will also explore to what extent these initiatives have influenced policies.

Morocco has among the highest rates of internet penetration in Africa, with over 10 million internet users (El Barakah 2015). According to the National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency, internet use exceeded 60%, and there are 44 million registered mobile users. The use of social media has also increased, with over 7 million Facebook users.[33] The infrastructure for 4G internet and other technologies has made it possible for millions of Moroccans – social activists as well as government employees – to engage online and voice their opinions about the most pressing issues of democracy and human rights in the country.

During the constitutional reform process in 2011, Tarik Nesh-Nash, a Moroccan computer engineer and innovator, created the participatory platform Reforme.ma, which enabled thousands of Moroccans to contribute to the drafting of the new constitution (Urquiza 2013). The comments and proposals submitted online were presented to the advisory committee in charge of constitutional reform. According to Nesh-Nash, 40% of the contributions were taken into account in the new constitution. After the adoption of the constitution, the government prepared several draft laws to implement the constitutional provisions. Some of these laws took into account citizens' input, others did not.

---

33. See www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm, accessed 23 September 2017.

In 2013, a social media campaign in Morocco – using a mix of strategies targeting decision makers – influenced the government to drop controversial digital code. The draft law sparked intensive cyber-protest, mainly by young internet users, who believed its provisions would put an end to online anonymity and limit freedom of expression. The campaign,[34] which used the hash tags #Code_Num [#almodwana rakmiya lan tamor], forced the government to put the law on hold. The case clearly showed that the government had begun to engage with an important online community voice in relation to the public policy-making process.

Other instances exist of the government reacting to cyber-protests in Morocco. The controversial case of minor Amina Filali,[35] who committed suicide after she was forced to marry her rapist, is a good example. Activists started an online campaign demanding a change in Article 475 of the penal code, which enabled a rapist to avoid prosecution if he married his victim. The online campaign discussed this case, which took place in a small town in Morocco, went beyond borders via social networks and turned it into an international cause célèbre; this then led to offline protests and advocacy before the government to change the law, and in 2014 the Moroccan Parliament repealed Article 475.

These initiatives sparked an important debate over the influence of social media in politics. Analysts noted that social media in Morocco played a major opposition role and had proved effective in influencing public policies, as seen in several measures taken by the government in response to online advocacy.

In 2016, the Moroccan Parliament passed two laws that allow citizens to present petitions and motions to the government and parliament (Zaireg 2016). The two laws will need time, in addition to other legal measures, to be implemented. But Moroccan activists are already using online petitions through Avaaz[36] and other sites. Online petitions via social networks are not yet recognised, but represent a powerful tool to pressurise the government, given the number of signatures that can be collected and their global reach.

In May 2016, an online petition[37] influenced a draft bill recently voted on by the Moroccan Parliament that allowed household labour for girls as young as 15. The e-advocacy campaign against child labour led the National Observatory for Children's Rights, chaired by Princess Lalla Meryem, to call for the revision of the age limit to 18. Despite the controversy, the parliament voted in June 2016 to fix this age at 16, albeit with conditions attached. Advocacy is still ongoing, with activists hoping to repeal and amend certain articles in line with civil society concerns (HuffPost Maroc 2016).

---

34. See www.facebook.com/DesobeissanceElectronique/?fref=ts, accessed 23 September 2017.
35. On the suicide of Amina Filali, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_of_Amina_Filali, accessed 26 February 2018.
36. Avaaz is a US-based civic organisation that promotes global activism.
37. See the online petition *Aux Parlementaires du Royaume du Maroc: Non à l'exploitation des mineures dans le travail domestique*, available at http://secure.avaaz.org/fr/petition/Aux_Parlementaires_du_ Royaume_du_Maroc_Non_a_lexploitation_des_mineures_dans_le_travail_domestique/?pv=25, accessed 26 February 2018.

An online petition[38] protesting the reception and burning of 2 500 tonnes of Italian waste on Moroccan soil, however, was more successful. The petition attracted the signatures of over 20 000 citizens concerned about their health and the environment, and the government moved to stop the future importation of foreign waste into the country. With Morocco hosting the 2016 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP22), this issue has led thousands of Moroccans to participate in online and offline discussions over environmental policies.

Another online petition with significant impact is the online campaign against aggression and vandalism in Morocco, #Zero_Grissage. The campaign aims to increase public safety and eradicate crime on the streets and calls for the security forces to be more effective. The Ministry of the Interior issued a press release after the launch of the campaign in July 2016 and is already taking measures to improve citizens' security. The authorities have also warned against the misuse of false images or unverified videos showing violent attacks against people in public spaces.

There is no doubt from the above-mentioned examples that the internet has become an alternative tool with a significant role and effective power to influence policies, even more than institutions. After the attempted military coup d'état in Turkey was literally defeated by a FaceTime call from President Erdogan's phone (Hearst 2016) calling on Turks to take to the streets, Moroccans who had anxiously followed these developments through social media reignited their e-campaign protesting against the Moroccan Government's ban on mobile calls through free internet apps such as WhatsApp, Viber and Skype (Al Hussaini 2016), making the argument that a VoIP call could save democracy, and lives.

For the legislative elections in October 2016, hundreds of individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs) were trained in election monitoring and engaged in political discussions over elections. Political parties in Morocco promoted their candidates online, who in turn are following youth trends and using online platforms to recruit supporters. There have also been campaigns by the government and CSOs to encourage youth participation in elections via online debates about government formation.

Social media has become an effective tool to promote democratic citizenship and human rights values, enabling citizens to hold governments accountable, monitor elections and engage each other in political debate. But issues of ethics and privacy, in addition to governmental concerns over security that often lead to control and censorship, remain challenging. Social media can be a platform for the dissemination of misleading information. Online users should be aware of their ethical responsibility to provide accurate, objective and reliable information without attacking the personal liberty and privacy of others.

Imaging technology also raises ethical concerns. Citizens and professional journalists connected to smartphones have new technologies for altering and manipulating images, which has created a huge trust problem regarding whether photos taken by citizens and citizen journalists online are true or fake. The convergence of traditional

---

38. See the online petition *FMDH : Refus de la gestion des déchets Italiens sur le territoire Marocain*, available at www.change.org/p/refus-de-la-gestion-des-d%C3%A9chets-italiens-sur-le-territoire-marocain, accessed 26 February 2018.

and new media as a means of information dissemination has raised questions regarding where to draw the line between regulation and censorship and how to protect freedom of expression, while safeguarding against inflammatory speech.

REFERENCES

Al Hussaini A. (2016), *Moroccans protest ban of VoIP calls, including Whatsapp, Viber, Facebook and Skype*, available at http://advox.globalvoices.org/2016/01/17/moroccans-protest-ban-of-voip-calls-including-whatsapp-viber-facebook-and-skype, accessed 26 February 2018.

El Barakah T. (2015), *Morocco among countries with highest internet penetration in Africa: Oxford Survey*, available at www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/07/163129/morocco-among-countries-with-highest-internet-penetration-in-africa-oxford-survey, accessed 26 February 2018.

Hearst D. (2016), *How an iPhone defeated the tanks*, available at www.middleeasteye.net/columns/how-iphone-defeated-tanks-turkey-1556177810, accessed 26 February 2018.

HuffPost Maroc (2016), "Les associations de défense des droits de l'enfant s'insurgent contre la loi sur le travail des 'petites bonnes'", available at www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2016/05/12/petites-bonnes-maroc_n_9926214.html, accessed 26 February 2018.

Mayton J. (2015), "Morocco has over 10 million internet users", available at www.itnewsafrica.com/2015/05/morocco-has-over-10-million-internet-users, accessed 26 February 2018.

Urquiza L. (2013), "Internet and citizen participation: Moroccan youths reinvent their democracy", available at http://blogs.worldbank.org/youthink/internet-and-citizen-participation-moroccan-youths-reinvent-their-democracy, accessed 26 February 2018.

Zaireg R. (2016), *Pétitions et motions au Maroc: Les projets de lois adoptés*, available at www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2016/01/28/manifestation-petition-lo_n_9096808.html, accessed 26 February 2018.