October 28, 2017 marked one year since the death of Mouhcine Fikri at the hands of security forces, which sparked anti-government protests in the city of al-Hoceima in Morocco’s northern Rif region. Fikri, a local fishmonger, was tragically crushed by a trash compactor while trying to retrieve fish confiscated by security officials. His death was ultimately ruled a homicide, after there were debates over the details of how exactly Fikri died. In November 2016, eleven people were sentenced to five to eight months in prison on charges of involuntary manslaughter and forgery of public documents used in the seizure of his fish. Protesters and others decried the light sentences and what they said was not a serious investigation or a trial, noting that some demonstrators have received sentences of several years for widely peaceful protests. A year later, public outrage continues to fuel ongoing protests.

**Context of the Protests**

The Rif has long been restive and marginalized, underdeveloped economically and underrepresented politically. Riffians have a distinctive Berber identity and Berber demands for autonomy have fueled unrest in the region dating back to the 1920s. The movement for justice following Fikri’s death catalyzed the recent wave of pro-Riffian protests, which called for reforms to fight unemployment and corruption. The protests were mobilized largely by al-Hirak al-Shaabi, or “Mouvance de Rif,” an al-Hoceima-based opposition movement. Al-Hirak’s main demands are for greater economic development in the Rif, more representation for Riffians in the national government, a serious inquiry and trial of those responsible for the death of Fikri, and the release of all political prisoners
detained for their roles in the al-Hoceima protests.

Since last year, protests have materialized across the north from al-Hoceima to Tétouan, spreading to the economic capital of Casablanca, to the political capital of Rabat, and to Marrakech in the south. Thousands of protesters have contested the arbitrary enforcement of law, abuse of power, corruption, and injustice.

**Some Government Promises...**

The government initially tried to stem the tide of protests by promising to invest more in the Rif region through development projects. In July, the government opened an oncology unit in al-Hoceima and agreed to hire more civil servants in the region.

Generally, however, the government’s response has been lackluster. The Palace has diverted blame onto municipal governments in the Rif for lack of economic development there. On July 29, in a speech marking the 18th anniversary of his accession to the throne, King Mohammed VI blamed political parties and local officials for the unrest because of the slow progress in implementing development projects. “The fact that political parties and their representatives refrain from performing their mission – sometimes deliberately, and sometimes out of a lack of credibility or patriotism – has further compounded the situation,” the King said. He applauded the efforts of law enforcement, declaring, “They have bravely and patiently fulfilled their duty, showing restraint and commitment to the rule of law as they maintained security and stability.”

After a report from the Palace found that “several sectors of government and public institutions have not fulfilled their commitments in implementing development projects worth nearly $700 million” in the Rif, King Mohammed dismissed the Minister of Education, Minister of Health, Minister of Housing and a junior minister of professional training on October 24. The public reaction to the King’s decision was mixed. “Nothing has changed. We need hospitals, jobs and freedom,” said one 29-year-old Moroccan, while the journalist Abdellah Tourabi called the ministerial dismissal “unprecedented” and “a strong political message.” Two al-Hirak detainees, Nasser Zefzafi, the leader of the al-Hirak movement, and Mohammed Majjaoui said in a letter [Ar] that the King’s move has “interacted positively with al-Hirak,” but continued to call upon the King to “restore the happiness of the Moroccan people, especially the people of the Rif by returning them back to the arms of their families.”

**...But Mostly a Hostile Response**

The main thrust of the government’s response to the protests, however, has been repression. Authorities have arrested several hundred demonstrators, including top leaders of al-Hirak. At least one demonstrator has been killed. There have been serious allegations of police abuse, including torture, of detainees.

On July 3, detained protester Omar Bouhrass told a judge at the Casablanca Court of Appeals that police beat him in custody while ordering him to say, “Long live the King.” Authorities then opened an investigation against him for “false reporting” against the police. According to Amnesty International, at least 66 people detained in relation to the Rif protests have reported suffering torture and other ill-treatment in custody. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has detailed abuses protesters have faced over the past year, calling on the King to “launch an investigation into the claims of abuses the detainees have faced while imprisoned.” Moroccan officials were quick to denounce [Ar] the report, saying it contained “unfounded allegations and errors concerning the management and treatment by the public authorities of demonstrations.”
On July 20, security forces fired tear gas on peaceful protesters, leading to clashes and the serious injury of Imad El Attabi, a 22-year-old from al-Hoceima. He suffered a severe head injury, eventually succumbing to the injury and passing away on August 8. Authorities said Attabi was injured by rocks thrown by fellow protesters, while demonstrators blamed security personnel.

In late July, the King pardoned 58 imprisoned members of the Hirak movement as part of a broader pardon of detainees announced on the eve of Throne Day, commemorating the King’s accession to the throne. Abdessadek al-Bouchtaoui, a lawyer for detained protesters, described the mass pardon as “a positive step that does not go far enough because we are calling for the release of everyone held.” The leader of al-Hirak, Zefzafi, remains detained over accusations that he obstructed, in the company of a group of individuals, freedom of worship when he allegedly interrupted a preacher at a mosque and called for demonstrations. “They did not even transfer [Zefzafi] to a nearer prison so that his mother could see him...she suffers from cancer. It is an injustice to us and to the detainees of the Hirak,” said Zefzafi’s father. According to his lawyer, Mohamed Ziane, Zefzafi could face up to 20 years in prison.

Hundreds of Moroccans demonstrated on October 8 in Casablanca to demand the freedom of the leading figures of al-Hirak. But the Moroccan government has continued to delay the trials of Zefzafi and another group of nearly two dozen detainees. In a short court appearance on October 24, Zefzafi reportedly shouted “long live the Rif,” along with many others on trial. The hearing was quickly suspended and postponed in order to “restore order.” The al-Hirak detainees face charges of undermining the internal security of the state, holding unauthorized public gatherings, and threatening the unity and sovereignty of the Kingdom.

Throughout the unrest, the Kingdom has also cracked down on the media. Hamid el-Mahdaoui, a prominent journalist and editor of the news website Badil.info, was sentenced to three months in prison for helping to organize and inciting people to participation in an unauthorized July 20 protest in al-Hoceima. Several foreign journalists have been detained and expelled from Morocco for reporting on the protests, including Spanish reporters Jose Luis Navazo and Fernando Sanz in July and the Guardian’s Saeed Kamali Dehghan.

A Year and Counting

As the anniversary of Fikri’s death approached, al-Hirak demanded the immediate release of all political detainees arrested for their roles in the al-Hoceima protests. Activists also called for a public dialogue and large-scale demonstrations throughout Morocco. The Moroccan government responded by banning all protest activity in al-Hoceima, justifying the ban by saying that the calls for demonstrations “generate an atmosphere of tension that negatively affects the public interest and public security.”

On October 28, despite the ban and an increased security presence, protesters in Imzouren city in the Rif took to the street to protest. At the protest, Fikri’s brother said that he was subjected to harassment and stopped throughout the day to prevent him from entering al-Hoceima. Sit-ins also took place in Casablanca, Rabat, Fes, and other Moroccan cities to commemorate Fikri’s death. About two thousand members of the Moroccan diaspora participated in a march in Rotterdam, Netherlands, as well. On the same day, two hundred international figures signed a petition to express solidarity and to call for the release of imprisoned protesters. The signatories include Noam Chomsky, 18 members of the European Parliament, and 18 members of national parliaments of European countries.

A year on, the protest movement has shown a resilience that is sure to remain a thorn in the side of the Moroccan government. Yet, aside from a visit last month from the United Nations Subcommittee
on Prevention of Torture to inspect police stations, prisons, and detention centers, the Kingdom has faced little external pressure to address the underlying grievances causing the unrest. The King’s pledge of economic development in northern Morocco is positive as far as it goes. But genuine implementation of social and economic programs in these neglected regions—not just hollow promises from the Palace and the government—is crucial, as is responding to political demands for justice and inclusion that resonate from the Rif to all corners of Morocco.

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