“Securitization” of the Rif Protests and its Political Ramifications

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September 2019
This publication was funded by

EUROPEAN ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
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Introduction

After almost three years since the start of social protests in the region of Rif, the ministerial commission in charge of Human Rights proclaimed in July 4, 2019 its first report about “Al Hoceima events and the protection of human rights” [1]. The report provoked human right advocates, who accused the directorate of attempting to “free the State’s responsibility over the events” [2]. This report brought to the front the position of the majority parties in May 14, 2017, when they accused the Hirak of Rif of separatism, and receiving foreign funding [3] which contributed to handle the protests with extra-ordinary security measures, by dealing with it as “security threat” instead of a socio-economic problem, which justified, by the end, the use of exceptional measures to face it.

Yet, this approach has been challenged by civil society and human rights activists who expressed their disagreement against the securitization of the Rif protests. This resistance went through two tracks: the first one on the field, while organizing national and regional marches by activists including parties, human rights entities and civil organizations to refuse the crackdown on the Rif protests. Whereas the second is, a discourse developed by human right actors who consider the Hirak of Rif as part of a new generation of protests, the one that the state failed to absorb.

By analyzing the way authorities handled the Hirak, it seems that the theory of Securitization [4] seems useful for examining authorities’ position in dealing with peaceful social protests. The process of securitization can be tracked by using three basic tools; first, by using governing parties, official media and mosques, as the bearers of the securitization discourse. Second, through linking the Hirak with accusations of secessionism, receiving foreign funding, and fueling chaos, in order to instigate public opinion against protesters. Finally, this has given the authorities an excuse to pursue exceptional measures against the protesters, by launching a campaign of mass arrests and trials, and imposing restrictions on public freedoms under the pretext of protecting public order.
This paper argues that the authorities’ securitization of Rif protests gives the security forces more power to impose order. However, its consequences might be harmful on the socio-political stability in the long term. Instead of treating popular protests as being an expression of mistrust over the state’s politics, it was considered as a security threat, which increasingly fuels tension and popular anger.

At a first step, the focus of this paper will be on the process of state’s securitization strategy against the Hirak of Rif. Then it analyzes its content and describe how it was structured to convince local and international public of exceptional measures used under the pretext of protecting public order. Finally, it examines its political and social cost. Furthermore, the paper will shed light on the counter-discourse that sought to cluck out the security feature against the Hirak of Rif, the discourse adopted by many actors who expressed their suspicion on the legitimacy and objectivity of the security-focused discourse and its impacts.

**Hirak of Rif’s Securitization Process**

The Hirak movement of Rif began after Mouhcine Fikri, a fishmonger, was crushed inside a garbage truck on the 28th of October, 2016 following authorities’ confiscation of his fish shipment he was carrying to the market. The tragic incident sparked angry reactions that spiralled to widespread protests covering many cities in the Rif region during almost seven months after the death of Fikri. The protests have fueled an already politically tense situation following the parliamentary elections of October 7, 2016, especially when the so-called political “blockage” prevented the Prime minister Abdel-Ilah Benkirane – then the secretary general of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) and winner of elections- from forming his government. Yet, the circumstances will change just after the announcement of the new government on the 7th of April, 2017 presided by Saad Eddin Othmani -also from the PJD- as the regime choose securitizing the Hirak of Rif.
In this context, it is useful to remind that the securitization process is essentially a language-based operation, as being a speech act that aimed at securitizing over non-security issues for the sake of justifying repressive measures. An issue becomes securitized when official actors define it through language as an imminent threat to state and society. The used vocabulary plays a crucial role in the process of garnering political support to legitimize repressive and exceptional measures [5]. That is to say that the securitization goes through a process which began firstly by limiting an issue as being a security problem, then politicizing it from the authority’s perspective in order to portray it as imminent security threat, thus putting it at the top of the security agenda.

Yet, the discourse is not enough for securitization to be achieved. It needs in fact to convince the public of its arguments. The public can be persuaded – as to say that Rif movement is separatist- and sometimes not. When a securitized discourse becomes dominant among the public, it gives authority the power to use exceptional measures, that cannot be exceeded in ordinary cases. In case the public is not convinced, the securitization operation fails, as its success depends on the power of convincing the public that the threat as being existential [6].

In this context, the ministry of interior was the first to expand a security discourse about the Hirak of Rif. During his visit to Al Hoceima on the 10th of April 2017, the interior Minister Abdelouafi Laftit talked about what he named as “suspicious targets” of some members and entities who exploited various protests mushroomed in the region in order to create political and social tension. The minister reveals also that those members are not just limiting their plans to field level, instead they handled it politically as well through promoting number of extremist political slogans and a hate speech against institutions in a vain attempt to achieve popular support.” [7] On the 13th of April 2017, the French magazine Jeune Afrique published pieces from a security report attributed to DGST (General Directorate of Territorial Security) -Morocco’s domestic intelligence agency- talking about attempts to infiltrate the movement of Rif by separatist organizations operating in Europe. According to the report, these organizations are behind the set-fire on a police residential building on July 26th March 2017 in Imzorene, and raise banners calling for separation in demonstra-
tions of the Hirak [8]. Moroccan official media, from its side, has seized what was revealed in Jeune Afrique and demanded the Public Prosecution to open an investigation since it is “unacceptable that the representative of the public right responds with silence over publishing very dangerous information”. For, it is the duty of Public Prosecution to protect society from what treats it from abroad using members from inside the country [9].

In addition to the Ministry of Interior and official media, other actors were further circulating accusations of separation, especially from governing parties and mosque preachers. On May 14th, 2017, after a meeting with the Minister of Interior in the Prime Minister’s house, the governing parties issued a statement condemning the Hirak and accusing it of secession and receiving foreign funding. On the 26th of the same month, 80 preachers were mobilized in mosques in the province of Al Hoceima to condemn the Hirak during Friday sermon, through linking it to the concept of fitna (turmoil) and instability. [10]. This had led the Hirak leader Nasser Zefzafi to protest inside the mosque where he prayed in, and helped authorities to launch a campaign of mass arrests, including the arrest of Zefzafi himself, charging him of insulting religious sanctities.

To better understand the process of securitization, some media outlets closed to the state have described the mosque incident as being “the mosque fitna” [11], taking in consideration the negative credit of the word “Fitna” in the Muslim collective awareness. It is likely that the aim was to mobilize the public opinion against the movement’s leaders, for the sake to isolating them while at the same time justifying the possible repressive measures. This objective was clear when the national television AlOula and Medi1 TV broadcasted a media report on May 27, 2017, in which they linked between Hirak of Rif and vandalism. In fact, the television report used images of burning and destruction of public and private properties that date long time before the protests in the Rif and more precisely during a football match between Widad Athletic Club and Shabab al-Rif Al-Husaimi in early 2017 [12].
Therefore, in addition to the incident of burning the security building in Imzourne, the authority considered the incident of Zefzafi’s protest inside the mosque as an excuse to convince the hesitated public that he and his companion’s behavior touches the essence of the public order, the fact that justified the security and judicial crackdown against them. From this incident, we could understand why the General Prosecutor in Al Hoceima has ordered the arrest of Zafzafi and his companions because of “obstructing freedom of worship and prohibited it during Friday prayer” [13]. These trials were made against 20 people in the same day, whereas Zefzafi was arrested on 29th of the same month, before expanding the arrests to cover about 450 people.

**The Counter-discourse: De-Securitization!**

Securitization of protests is something tempting to authority, as it offers an opportunity to act exceptionally outside the rule of law, through adopting politics of force under the pretext of maintaining public order. This could be politically and morally valid in case the threat was objective with respect of due process, and where the aim is to protect individual’s security not that of the political regime [14].

In the case of Hirak of Rif, however, security operations were not appropriate with the seriousness of the threat as the crackdown led to the death of a peaceful activist, Imad al-Atabi, apart from illegal houses raids and the arrest of nearly 450 members and alleged use of torture in some cases. Among those arrested, 53 of them were transported to Casablanca where they faced collective trial on charges of disobedience, violence against the police and receiving foreign funding. [15] These measures have put the state in confrontation with a fierce critique from the side of a relevant part of national public opinion, as well as from civic and political actors and human rights bodies.

Securitization of Hirak of Rif generated a twofold counter-discourse: one on the field, which dedicated its efforts to undermine the arguments of the securitized discourse about the Hirak by criticizing the accusations of secession and receiving foreign funding. This was highlighted while marching in peaceful
protests organized regionally and nationally, where it reveals a new perspective that approaches the movement of Rif as being among new generation of protest that the state fails to absorb. On May 18th, 2017, the local population in Al Hoceima demonstrated against the authority accusations of secession and receiving foreign funding against the Hirak [16]. Furthermore, many political parties, civil society and human rights organizations called for a national march in Rabat on June 11th, 2017 where they raised the slogan “We are not secessionists”. The participants called also for the release of prisoners and to stop arresting other activists, as well as responding as quickly as possible to their economic and social demands [17]. If these marches represented an attempt to contain Hirak of Rif from political parties and national bodies, it revealed also a counter view of that expressed by the state.

Albeit the restriction of the state over the right to peaceful protest, protesters have created new forms of peaceful protest and succeeded in overcoming the state of securitization. Examples of such forms are beating dishes, switching off the lights, organizing marches in beach, or walking through rough tracts of villages and towns to the city of Al Hoceima. Even at height of restriction, young people invented technic of “Chen Ten” which announces -at one time- marches from different neighborhoods to the center of Al Hoceima city [18]. Challenge of the citizens had reached its climax when marching peacefully on July 20th, 2017, which unfortunately resulted in fierce confrontation leading to the death of the activist Imad al-Atabi. [19].

The second pathway of the counter discourse was expressed by human rights organizations, which criticized the dominance of security approach in dealing with affairs of liberty such as the right of protest and peaceful demonstration. In June 2017, an initiative called “the civil initiative for Rif” released a report in which it considers that the accusation of secession against the Hirak wasn’t based on objective information, stressing that “according to our information, there is no existence of a separatist trend within the protest movement”. The civil initiative has presented a different approach than that of the government, as it considered the Hirak of Rif as belonging to a new generation of social pro-
test that was characterized by its peaceful, urgency, sharpness and rejection of mediations with the state [20].

Concerning the discourse of human right organizations, it focused mainly on criticizing the leaning of the state towards using too much force while dealing with this peaceful social protest; that even government has recognized the legitimacy of its demands. In this regard, a report by Human Rights Watch, spoke of an “undeclared blockade” of Al Hoceima City, and of “excessive use of force”, and even “cases of torture of detainees” [21], according to the forensic report done for the National Council for Human Rights, which admitted accusations of torture and kept away from public usage so far [22]. Furthermore, and in addition to the leak of video tape showing Zefzafi naked, and on his head, left eyes and under his back being bruised and wounded which recognizes the same charges [23].

In fact, the de-securitization discourse has developed counter arguments against the official discourse, that the latter still didn’t come out with convincing answers about it, including the report of the ministerial commission in charge of human rights. This latter has been described by some human right advocates as “not a human right report” [24], especially in the section that denies torture cases, the appropriateness of security measures with the recorded legal violations, as well as the increase of judicial decisions against detainees.

Yet, it seems that authorities understood that the securitizing approach against Hirak of Rif has its own limits as it may increase the tension between the Rif and the state. This could be understood in the context of the royal speech delivered on 29th of July 2017 at the anniversary of the Throne [24], as well as other following proceedings. For, at the time the King Mohamed VI adopted a dedicated opinion about the events saying that the political parties assume the responsibility of the events, to rectify the situation by releasing many detainees on the occasion of the Eid al-Adha holiday of 2018. The release of arrests covered about 188 prisoners of the movement, including 11 from the Casablanca group, [26]. This method continued in many other national occasions and revealed once again the emerging feeling of settling gradually this file by the state [26].
Conclusion

To conclude, the choice of conducting securitization measures by the state against the Hirak of Rif started in the level of discourse, and concentrated on speeches of secession, foreign funding and sedition, taking advantage of specific events before moving to exceptional wide crackdown and restrictions on public freedoms. The leaning of the state towards securitization approach has engendered reactions from the local population, as well as civil and human rights organizations, which sought to criticize this approach and the way authorities dealt with peaceful protests.

Between those two conflicting approaches, one could notice that the Hirak of Rif has revealed the weakness of mediation mechanisms, and the limited politics and programs of reconciliation adopted by the state during two decades towards the region of the Rif. It uncovers also how the local elites -that the state depends on- are isolated from its social and political reality, and put the Hirak in direct confrontation with the state, the fact that obliges the state to choose hard power but with the inability to endure its cost.

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