The Discursive Construction of Contention in Moroccan Social Movement of 20th February

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Introduction

The recent social uprisings in the Arab world have been of an influential historical moment. Large numbers of Arab populations have taken to the street in protest marches demanding better social, economic, political, and cultural horizons. In both Tunisia and Egypt, protest marches have resulted in the toppling down of Ben Ali’s and Mubarak’s regimes. In Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, protest marches seem to intimidate and threaten the existence of the present regimes in these states. In Morocco, however, the protest marches can be said to have triggered a deep constitutional change: a fact which will believably affect and influence a number of social, economic, political, and cultural aspects in the country.

To many sociologists and social observers, the lack of social and economic opportunities, political corruption, collective frustration, and continual governmental mismanagements reside at the heart of these Arab social uprisings. Most of post-colonial Arab governments seem to have failed to live up to the expectations of their populations, notably the expectations of an increasingly large young population. Worst of all, social mistrust in the formal representative institutions, lack of youth mobilization on the part of the political parties, and absence of vibrant civil society organizations and associations, among many others, have also ignited and fueled the scale of this social unrest.

Putting in perspective the historical context of these social movements in the Arab world, a new factor appears to be of paramount importance to our discussion here: social media. The use of social media seems to have influentially mediated and precipitated the scale of these social movements both in terms of audience reach and impact. Social media websites and tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in particular, have widely contributed to mediating and substantiating the influence and power of these protest groups and social movements among Arab nations. To illustrate, Facebook and Twitter, for instance, have proved their merit in the immediate and wide mobilization of the populations. As it is exemplified in the Egyptian case, a single short message on Facebook or Twitter posted and shared by an activist in Cairo could trigger protests marches of thousands of people on the streets within a few days. In the Tunisian example, the same holds true. A video or a series of images shot by an amateur activist and posted on YouTube could generate and sustain a deep emotional affinity among large numbers of Tunisian citizens, procure a plethora of online commentaries and...
reactions, and thus, motivate people to take to the street in demonstration. Social media, in other words, can be said to have played an instrumental role in mediating new online Arab social movements and in foregrounding their struggle.

Similarly, this paper engages with the Moroccan social movement of 20th February. It primarily seeks to explore and analyze the discourse of this online social movement in an attempt to identify its constituting layers of discursivity. More particularly, this paper seeks to (1) lay bare the major themes and concepts motivating this discourse; (2) understand the socio-cultural conditions under which this movement has been born; and (3) define the major sites of struggle to which this movement strives to direct attention. As such, the paper resorts to thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report the discursive patterns inherent to the discourse of the movement.

A. CONCEPTUALIZING THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The paper draws on the thematic analysis approach in analyzing the data gathered for the purpose of this study. Thematic analysis is theoretically aligned under the qualitative method of research. As Braw and Clarke state (2006: 79): a chief aspect of thematic analysis is “its capability of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” The authors’ statement suggests that thematic analysis is suitable for the researchers who aim to lay bare and identify the themes and conceptual patterns inherent in their data. To further acquaint oneself with the basics of this research method, the following statement by Boyatzis (1998: vii) best captures the most important underlying assumptions behind the practice of thematic analysis:

• Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information. The encoding requires an explicit “code.” This may be a list of themes, a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are causally related.

• As an analytic qualitative data method, thematic analysis best suits the purpose of the present paper. First, it examines the ways social phenomena are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It is, in other words, a method which helps the researcher to contextualize and extend his/her method of investigation. This is because this method acknowledges the ways individuals and groups make meanings out of their experiences and out of their social context while it still retains focus on the data. Bearing in mind that this paper primarily engages with discourse, this method seems then highly conducive to the stated objectives of the paper. It is believed to enhance and help the analysis and discussion of the different discursive ideas, themes, and concepts giving shape to the discourse of the social movement under investigation. Second, thematic analysis provides researchers with a set of basic practical and informed steps to perform their analysis in a consistent and steady manner. Given this, the paper deems it very important to rely on these informed steps in order to achieve its goals.

B. MAPPING THE DISCOURSE AREAS OF CONTENTION

This figure best illustrates the key thematic areas of concern which inform the discourse of the Moroccan social movement 20th February. Four thematic areas seem here to give shape to the discourse. As is shown, social aspects cover up a significant proportion of the overall thematic areas, representing 35%. The area of reform constitutes the second major component. It represents 24% of the overall thematic spectrum. The third major area of concern relates to the theme of democracy. It constitutes 22%. With respect to the fourth area, it relates to the theme of corruption. It takes up 17% of the overall spectrum.

As such, the figure provides us with a revealing insight into the fundamental areas of engagement which influence the action of 20th February movement. The discourse of the movement, in this respect, is a multi-dimensional discourse influenced by a set of certain socio-economic factors. Given Figure 1, it appears that the social element is strongly present in the discourse of the movement. This is explained by the significant percentage this area is allocated, compared to the other areas in the spectrum. This substantiates the claim that social issues constitute a basic site of engagement for the movement. Hence, 20th February movement is largely structured around the social element of the Moroccan society. The discourse has another dimension. Given its significant percentage in the spectrum, the idea of reform is also strongly present in the discourse of 20th February movement. Taking into consideration the discussion of this theme within the movement, it appears that propositions for alternative socio-economic and socio-political conditions shape the discursive aspects of 20th February movement. Discussion of the concept of reform centers on the motive that a comprehensive alternative societal project seems now an indispensable element for enacting change in Morocco. The discourse of the movement has also a third dimension. The ideal of a democratic society also seems to be one of the discursive fundamentals of the movement. Discussion of this ideal within the movement gives rise to a utopian vision for a new “social contract” based on the ability of a just state to promote respect for human rights, foster social equality, and guarantee political liberties. For most of 20th February
activists, these would necessarily lead to establishing strong democratic conventions. Furthermore, the discourse of 20th February movement also entails an ethical dimension. From the perspective of the movement, exposing and uncovering the corrupt behavior inherent in the community is of necessity. Principal ideas of its discourse on corruption basically revolve around the role of socialization and conscious-raising in putting an end to this social epidemic. Bearing in mind the multi-dimensionality of its discourse, 20th February movement, in this regard, may be characterized as a social movement that is deeply responsive to its socio-political environment and as a movement that is built around a variety of purposes.

Similarly, the discourse of 20th February movement may imply that Morocco undergoes a process of social change. Three important factors may account here for this process. First, Morocco has recently experienced an increase in population growth: because of the steady development in health-care services, Morocco has known an insurgent increase in child-birth rates. One aspect where this clearly manifests itself is in the wide demographic proportion of young people. This explains why the movement of 20th February largely consists of young people. Second, technology has also its place in the discussion of social change. Moroccan young people demonstrate good use and command of the recent technological inventions and tools. One example where this shows is their use of the Internet. Third, Morocco seems to have undergone a process of cultural transformation. This is observed in the change of the ideas, knowledge, values, and beliefs about a number of cultural issues and concerns. This may further be explained in terms of the cultural globalization the world is experiencing. Globalization, for instance, has increasingly brought to discussion international law and made the state face meticulous scrutiny by a large number of global civil society organizations. As a result, Morocco has known an emergence of a culture of human rights. The remarkably passionate engagement of 20th February movement with ideas of justice, rights, and legislative entitlements observed in its discourse may account for this form of transnational influence of global civil society organizations on national activist organizations. The discourse of 20th February social movement, in this respect, may be seen partly as an outcome of this transformation. As Della Porta (2006: 35) suggests “Social change may affect the characteristics of social conflict and collective action in different ways.... It may facilitate the emergence of social groups with a specific structural location and potential specific interests.”

Two perspectives can account here for the underlying structure of the discourse of 20th February movement. On the one hand, it is clear that the socio-economic and socio-political conditions are in part behind the emergence of this discourse. The discourse is a reflection of the existent conditions in the community. This explains why the social and political elements are strongly present in the thematic figure above. Moreover, this also accounts for the idea that 20th February movement derives its power of contention from the impact of the socio-cultural conditions on the Moroccan community. On the other hand, the multi-dimensionality of the movement’s discourse suggests that it addresses a variety of purposes. Unlike identity, ethnic, or environmental social movements, 20th February movement seems to engage with a number of issues, ranging from the social and economic to the political domains. It is not then a social movement which centers its struggle on one specific area. Rather, it varies its points of target to include most of the important domains in the country. The movement’s role seems that of the other specialized civil society organizations and groups.

By extension, we can further analyze the causes of emergence as regards 20th February movement in light of the ‘supply and demand’ theoretical model, which some sociologists have developed to account for similar social movements in the world. As an explanatory theoretical model, it emphasizes the idea that social movements often emerge as a result of the collective discontent experienced by a community or group of people. What feeds this collective discontent are feelings of grievance, relative deprivation, and the experience of illegitimate inequality. Consequently, collective discontent gives incentive for the people to demand change and motivate them to take action (Della Porta 2006: 362). What brings about the ‘supply’ aspect of this model is the role of social movements in mobilization, notably in substantiating the idea that collective action has ultimately an instrumental character. It is the belief that social movements can make a change and that “the situation can be changed” for there are “opportunities to make an impact” (Della Porta 2006: 363). Given the model’s insight, it seems, therefore, consistent to suggest that 20th February movement in part operates according to this logic of action. Analysis of the discussion of Moroccan socio-economic conditions by the youth of 20th February movement on Facebook groups, for instance, suggests that the discourse of the movement has been transformed from an individual sense of discontent to a collective one voiced by a majority of activists. The variety of media content expressing discontent on a particular social or political aspect shared on Facebook by the movement’s activists has accumulated and helped turn these feelings of grievance into a challenging collective behavior expressed in a variety of ways such as posters of revolutionary icons like Che Guevara, songs of freedom, videos of street demonstrations, recorded videos for mobilization, and written messages. The ‘supply’ aspect of 20th February movement lies its later role in mobilizing significant numbers of youth activists to take the streets and demand change.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has been mainly concerned with studying and analyzing the discourse of the Moroccan social movement of 20th February. It has primarily endeavored to investigate into the major ideas, arguments, and concepts which give shape to this discourse, thus delving into the ways this social movement conceptualizes and constructs contention at many levels. The paper has also defined the socio-cultural conditions under which this movement has been born and the major sites of struggle to which it strives to direct attention. It has showcased how the construction of the movement’s discursivity has accumulated and helped turn feelings of grievance into a challenging collective behavior expressed in a variety of ways such as posters, songs of
freedom, videos of street demonstrations, and recorded videos for mobilization.

REFERENCES