

The State Has Failed to Understand Morocco's GenZ... An Interview with Human Rights Advocate Khalid al-Bakari



In the midst of the protest wave that Morocco has witnessed in recent weeks a movement which began in virtual digital spaces before spilling into the streets observers find themselves facing an unprecedented youth phenomenon both in form and substance. Behind the calls of “GenZ,” which began in discussion rooms on the platform Discord, social and economic demands intertwine with political and human rights questions.

The issues are no longer limited to health and education, but have broadened to include corruption and rent-seeking, mismanagement of public policy, and spatial disparities all against the backdrop of an economic crisis and a decline in citizens’ purchasing power. As popular anger expands, questions have emerged about the efficacy of a security-based approach when dealing with a generation whose awareness and tools are different.

In a special interview with Noon Post, Dr. Khalid al-Bakari, the Moroccan academic and human rights activist, offers an analytical reading of the GenZ protest experience in Morocco. He pauses to consider the causes of its outbreak,

how the authorities dealt with it, whether citizens can regain trust in the country's political parties, and the factors that led to demands for the dismissal of the government of Aziz Akhannouch.

Q: How do you interpret the wave of protests currently sweeping Morocco? Do you see them as an expression of a temporary crisis linked to the health and services sector, or as the result of deeper, decades-long socio-economic imbalances?

The current wave of protests which began with calls by youth organising discussion rooms on the Discord platform is not solely connected to the dysfunctions registered in the health and education sectors. The protest discourse of what is called "Gen Z" has evolved toward raising issues of corruption and rent-seeking, mismanagement of public policy, and trust in institutions. Then, following a series of arrests of many protesters, issues of democracy, human rights and freedom of expression also re-emerged.

Accordingly, one can regard the initial demands on health and education as largely a "pretext" to gain legitimacy for the protests and social acceptability within the community something the current protest movement has achieved, compelling official, institutional and party factors to recognise its legitimacy.

And these are protests belonging to a continuous sequence of peaceful civil protest in Morocco, ongoing for more than a decade, appearing each time in a new form: sometimes of a spatial nature (for example the Rif Hirak, water protests in Figuig, thirst marches in several villages...), and sometimes of a category nature (for example contracted teachers protests, medical students, lawyers...).

This time however, we see a generational youth form, both in terms of mobilisation and field presence.

I believe two interlocking factors are at play: the first internal, linked to the deterioration of basic public services in Morocco (health, education, employment...), which is essentially tied to the state gradually transferring these services to the private sector; also linked to the decline in citizens' purchasing power as a result of inflation and monopolies, alongside the cost of contributions to organising the 2030 World Cup, which has deepened spatial inequalities.

The second factor is external: the influence of successive protest waves in many countries around the world, particularly in Europe and America, which are characterised by strong youth participation and the raising of issues around financial elites, transnational corporations, and the decline of the state's role in public services.

Not to mention the impact of images of pro-Palestinian protests, which turn into confrontations with the state at the discursive level and with public forces at the field level. These scenes by virtue of rapid transmission on social-media platforms become a cross-cultural and cross-national mobilisation catalyst.

Q: We observed a shift in the response of the Moroccan authorities to the protests: the state attempted to block them at first arguing they were unlicensed, then after violence broke out they allowed them. How do you read that shift?

I believe that the activation of the security approach in the early days of the protests had a dual aim: first, arresting a large number of protesters with the intention of building a data-bank which could help the security and intelligence authorities identify the “masterminds” of this dynamic. Second, creating a form of intimidation intended to bury the protests at their inception.

I believe the state realised early that the over-use of violent security interventions during the protests was a mistake, because it became fodder for mobilisation and increased public sympathy with the protesters. Therefore, it later allowed the organisation of sit-ins without friction with protesters.

Note that the violent incidents recorded in the early days of the protests did not occur in the places where the protest movement called for demonstrations, but in areas where no protest had been scheduled, and at late hours of the night and involved minors and delinquent elements. The question raised is: how did these events start? And how did they suddenly stop?

This makes the demand for an impartial, serious investigation a necessity, especially given the existence of fatalities. Unfortunately, the acceleration of trials and rapid issuance of initial sentences for these events do not help either the guarantees of a fair trial or the disclosure of truth and tracing the planning and mobilisation threads underlying these condemnable acts.

We do not deny the possibility that the deeply troubling social conditions in those areas may have motivated the slide into violence, amid the security looseness recorded during those days because public forces were busy securing the venues called for peaceful sit-ins.

Q: Does this mean that the security-based approach has failed when dealing with a generation with different specificities from previous ones?

A security-based approach alone is, by its nature, bound to fail when dealing with any phenomenon whatsoever, not only protests. Let's take the example of the terrorist phenomenon: although the Moroccan security institutions have had successes in containing and dismantling extremist cells operations that are promoted nationally and internationally this has not led to the eradication of

extremist ideology.

The evidence is the continuing discovery of new cells every year. The reason lies in the weakness of religious and cultural framing, the failure of the educational system, the mediocrity of the media landscape, and the persistence of exclusion and poverty.

Hence, reliance on the security approach alone will not succeed in halting protests as evidenced by their persistence despite all the repression and rapid trials. On the contrary, the long-term effect will harm the institutions of security and justice themselves, which will be viewed as instruments of oppression and control, serving the interests of those benefiting from a situation dominated by monopolies, rent-seeking and corruption, and the dominance of the rentier minority.

Regarding the current protests, the security approach has not receded, despite the allowance of sit-ins: it proceeds with other tools such as ongoing arrests, rapid trials, and the return of electronic disinformation battalions attempting to misrepresent this dynamic by suggesting external interference.

This means that nothing has really changed in the strategy of facing protest dynamics: it relies on security interventions accompanied by arrests, then driving the protest dynamic into exhaustion and self-disintegration by betting on the length of protest without tangible results, creating internal confrontations, turning secondary contradictions into primary ones, and attempting to isolate the mass base through disinformation and rumours which artificial intelligence now assists greatly in, amid digital illiteracy that makes receivers unable to distinguish fabricated from genuine images/videos culminating in the circumvention of demands through a package of promises that contain no trustworthy guarantees.

Q: Since independence, Morocco has witnessed numerous protests and uprisings. What distinguishes the protests of this generation from their predecessors in terms of demands, and in how Moroccan authorities treat them, especially given that some argue the demands have a lower ceiling than what they were in 2011?

In my view, the matter is less about the generation than about the contexts. Previous protests were youth-centred too, including those during the colonial era. If we want to speak of transformations, we can talk about the shift from violent protest which endured until the early 1990s (December 14, 1990) and was characterised by violent confrontation with public forces (e.g., 1981 and 1984 protests) to peaceful civil protest, which began particularly with the unemployed graduates movement in the mid-1990s and continued with the 20

February 2011 movement, the 2016/17 Rif Hirak, and encompasses the full range of category, professional and spatial protests (Jerada, Aït Boukhamaz, Amendis in Tangiers...), as well as solidarity marches with the Palestinian people.

However, this does not mean the end of violent protest, as we may see its return where the two factors converge: deepening class and spatial disparities meaning protest moves from the middle class to the deprived, the excluded and marginalized especially in the face of declining access to a decent minimum standard of living owing to transformations in urban management, primarily economic and real estate.

Also, factor in the global return of violent protest: we must not forget that the emphasis on the term “peacefulness” in protests was influenced by a global context tied to the wave of protests accompanying the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc in Europe.

The second transformation in protests concerns the digital context: social media platforms have become effective tools of mobilisation, incitement, documentation and public discussion. The third transformation concerns the rise of new social movements, distant from classic trade union or party frameworks.

This latter shift while enabling protests to reach different categories and escaping institutional party/union control limits their negotiating capacity, thus facilitating governments and authorities to bypass their demands.

This raises the problem of having a political expression that enables the consolidation of the protest movement and the safeguarding of its gains.

Q: How do you assess the decentralised and digital nature of these protests? Does this form of organisation represent the start of a new protest model in Morocco?

It is not the first time that protests in Morocco have been decentralised: we experienced that in the 20 February movement, and in the unemployed graduates movement; even the 1984 protests had extensions in cities across north, centre and south.

But this does not negate that we are facing a new model of protest action though it is a development within the protest system rather than a total rupture. Accordingly, I prefer to speak of a “development from within” the protest pattern imposed by changing context, rather than a definitive break.

It is a development in the networking mechanisms, which have become digital; in the decision-making and approval mechanisms, which have become faster and more decisive; and in mobilisation, which is primarily digital. If before the 20

February protests we faced a paradigm mainly field-based (venues and street), with 20 February we shifted to a field-(mass decision-making)-virtual (mobilisation) then field (street protest) paradigm, today we are with an inverted paradigm: virtual for decision-making, then field for protest, then back to virtual for evaluation.

This might be a precursor to a coming global era in which every protest is digital not only mobilisation and decision-making, but for example civil disobedience transforming from institutional sit-ins and work-stoppage to digital disruption.

Q: Some see young people's taking to the streets as a failure of the mediation institutions, especially parties and unions. In your view, what are the necessary conditions to restore trust between youth and political parties?

I will be brief: I no longer see any possibility of citizens not only youth regaining trust in the current parties, despite the presence of a few principled parties trying to work with the masses and aligning with the protest demands.

But they suffer from fragmentation, organisational bleed-out, limited logistics, and leaderships that have not emerged from thinking, analysis and action mechanisms capable of following current value and cultural transformations, especially due to digital shifts.

But this should not be a source of comfort for either the state or the various opposition groups, because one cannot imagine democracy at least under current conditions without strong parties and institutional counter-powers.

And I believe the evolving trajectory of protest action and the growth of new social movements whether social, identity or generational-based may lead to the question of a "political carrier", which in turn may contribute to the emergence of new political expressions, which may in turn lead to the establishment of alternative party and union formations.

This is what happened in the past with new-left movements, which resulted from the erosion of classical socialist movement vehicles; and today we see in Brazil, Bolivia, Spain, France and South Africa, transformations from social-movement expressions to structured political expressions.

Q: This generation expressed a definitive rejection of dialogue with the government, and asked for its dismissal. Can this be regarded as an inevitable consequence of suspicions of corruption and conflict of interest that have followed the government since its inception?

The rejection of dialogue with the government for me includes two factors: the first is that this government is the practical embodiment of the marriage of money and power; hence it is the government most firmly defending the interests

of rent-seeking oligarchies, and is the one whose parliamentary majority contains many individuals being prosecuted or convicted in cases of embezzlement of public funds, electoral corruption, tax evasion, international drug trafficking and others.

The second is linked to the conviction that the real centre of power lies with the royal institution; hence the appeal must be directed primarily to the King, and waiting for his intervention to reform what can be reformed.

Q: You once said in a media appearance that Aziz Akhannouch is the weakest among the prime ministers you have experienced in Morocco. In your view, where does this weakness manifest?

I spoke of his communications and charisma weakness. In each of his pre-arranged appearances it becomes clear that he lacks political communication skills and modesty in political knowledge. Thus he may be a successful businessman, but he is a political failure and this failure is structural, since he lacks experience in grassroots political work. Even the team working with him on this side (for example the government spokesperson) is weak compared with those who worked with previous prime ministers or first ministers.

But this does not rule out his success at two levels: the first, his transformation of the National Rally of Independents party into his political enterprise, now largely led by those who work with him at his financial holding's board. The second, his ability to become the representative of Morocco's financial and rentier-patronage class all of which have rallied around him and bet on his remaining prime minister for a second mandate, which gives him a solid financial base.

Q: The recent cabinet meeting chaired by King Mohammed VI announced raising the budget for health and education to more than 140 billion dirhams in 2026. In your view, is this move sufficient to reform these two sectors?

It is not sufficient and I don't believe the government claims that it is sufficient. The Minister of National Education said that increasing the budget from about 85 billion dirhams to around 97 billion would not enable resolving all the problems linked to the sector, including issues still on the table of the sector's dialogue with unions.

But let's be honest: the announcement that the budget for the education and health sectors will rise to 140 billion dirhams combined is reminiscent of what companies do when they talk of price reductions, only for customers to later find that those reductions involve some form of obfuscation.

The truth is that the increase did not exceed 20 billion dirhams in both sectors

together compared to the previous year and a large portion of this increase will be consumed by the wage bill because of salary increases in the last two years and the hiring of about 27,000 new employees. Moreover, many of the projects announced as part of the 2026 budget are actually financed by the 2025 budget or earlier, such as some university hospital centers.

I would simply point to the issue of the “Tamad” (social welfare) scheme within the «AMO-TADAMOUN» social protection account, which exceeds 10 billion dirhams and goes to private medical clinics; whereas it would have been better to maintain the RAMED scheme, which cost only 2 billion dirhams at best, and direct the rest toward investing in building and repairing hospitals and hiring staff especially given the great deficit of doctors, particularly in surgery-dependent specialties: anesthesiology, intensive care...

Only a final remark about hiring in the education sector: talk is of moving from about 15,000 posts to 19,000 posts, but in truth this number is only a return to what it was three years ago when posts exceeded 22,000 for contracted teachers; note that we face a wave of retirements in the sector reaching about 30,000 employees by 2028 i.e. about 10,000 retirees per year.