

## From 2011 to 2025: Moroccan Protests Rekindle Old Demands with New Tools



Since late September 2025, Morocco has been gripped by a wave of protests that have evoked memories of the 2011 demonstrations led by the February 20 Movement, when young people took to the streets demanding freedom, dignity, and social justice.

Today, similar slogans are resurfacing, but in a markedly different context—this time through a new movement known as “Gen Z 212,” which relies heavily on social media, particularly Discord, for mobilization.

What began as protests over clear social demands better education, healthcare reform, combating corruption, and job creation has quickly escalated into violence in some areas, raising serious questions about the evolving relationship between the Moroccan state and society.

### Echoes of the Past, Realities of the Present

Many of the demands voiced in the 2025 protests mirror those of the February 20 Movement in 2011, focusing on the right to employment, social justice, anti-

corruption, and improved public services in education and healthcare. However, the current protests reflect a lowered ceiling of ambition. While the 2011 movement demanded sweeping constitutional reforms, the dissolution of government and parliament, an independent judiciary, and trials for those involved in corruption and abuse of power, today's demands are more grounded in day-to-day grievances.

Organizationally, the two movements differ significantly. The 2025 protests are led by politically unaffiliated youth using digital platforms like Discord. In contrast, the February 20 Movement benefited from the support of political parties and labor unions, which lent it structural strength. Gen Z 212's decentralized model rejects affiliation with any political, union, or civil organization, emphasizing spontaneous, leaderless mobilization.

This shift reflects deepening distrust in traditional political institutions and unions, and demonstrates how quickly protests can spread and how difficult they are to control—unlike a decade and a half ago, when organizing tools were more limited.

The political and regional context has also changed. While the 2011 protests prompted constitutional reforms and stronger legal guarantees for rights and freedoms, many Moroccans feel the gap between legal text and real-life implementation has only widened. The resurgence of familiar slogans suggests a collective frustration that the institutional reforms of 2011 failed to bring meaningful improvement to ordinary lives.

Furthermore, the party system has lost much of its credibility, with widespread youth sentiment that political parties neither represent them nor hear their concerns. This explains the horizontal and decentralized nature of the current protests, which are not backed by any traditional organizational structures.

Regionally, 2025 bears little resemblance to 2011, when the Arab Spring ignited democratic aspirations across the region. Today, the Middle East and North Africa are marked by authoritarian regression, tighter security control, and economic crises exacerbated by inflation, the lingering impacts of COVID-19, and climate change. These factors have intensified social tensions, especially among youth who see no viable future ahead.

In Morocco, the current unrest has been further fueled by controversies surrounding the government led by Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch. Allegations of conflict of interest, corruption, and abuse of power have dogged his tenure, including the appointment of ministers with no relevant expertise.

The appointment of Amin Tahraoui an associate of the Prime Minister with a background in private business rather than healthcare as Health Minister, has

drawn sharp criticism. Many view him as emblematic of the issues fueling the protests.

Transparency Maroc, an NGO, summed up this sentiment, stating: “A government that legally protects corruption cannot be expected to respond to the people’s aspirations or respect the constitution and the law.”

### From Peaceful Protest to Violence

Initially, Gen Z 212’s demonstrations were peaceful, with youth in various cities rallying for basic social services. But as the movement spread, some areas saw the protests spiral into open confrontations with security forces.

According to the Interior Ministry, some of these gatherings became illegal assemblies marked by violence, including the use of knives, stone-throwing, gas canister explosions, and the burning of tires all of which escalated tensions.

The same statement noted that over 70% of those involved in these incidents were minors, raising additional concerns about the demographics of the movement and the challenges of maintaining control.

In one particularly alarming incident in the town of Lqliâa, in the southern province of Inezgane-Aït Melloul, protesters attempted to storm a police station and seize weapons and ammunition. Royal Gendarmerie forces responded with live fire under the pretext of self-defense, resulting in the deaths of three individuals.

Authorities also reported 354 injuries 326 among security personnel as well as extensive property damage, including 271 police vehicles, 175 private cars, and the vandalism and looting of nearly 80 public facilities and shops across 23 provinces and districts.

In a statement circulated on social media, Gen Z 212 disavowed these acts of violence, reaffirming the movement’s peaceful nature and urging protesters to avoid behavior that could discredit their legitimate demands. The group laid out three guiding principles: “No insults or vulgar language, no vandalism of public or private property, and no deviation from non-violence.”

The shift from peaceful protest to violence is not driven by a single cause. It results from a complex mix of frustration over the perceived ineffectiveness of peaceful protest, provocations on the ground during the early days of demonstrations, and the actions of unaffiliated individuals or groups who deviate from the movement’s core agenda. These elements, in turn, can trigger heavy-handed responses from security forces, creating a cycle of escalation.

In 2011, the government relied on short-term political solutions to defuse unrest. This time, with political mediation weakened and no credible channels of

trust between protesters and the government, the state appears to be leaning more heavily on security responses—potentially reigniting rather than resolving public anger.

The most striking difference between 2011 and 2025 is not merely the use of digital coordination tools, but also the nature of the state's response. In 2011, King Mohammed VI delivered a swift and impactful speech that helped calm the streets and usher in significant reforms. Today, the government has yet to engage publicly, aside from a joint statement from the ruling coalition that many observers dismissed as vague and tone-deaf.

### A Crisis of Mediation and Trust

Unlike in 2011, the 2025 protests lack political or social intermediaries capable of bridging the gap between the street and the state. Back then, despite their limitations, parties, associations, and recognizable figures within the February 20 Movement played a role in articulating demands and framing them in negotiable terms. Today's total decentralization leaves the state facing a leaderless, angry street with no clear counterparts to negotiate with.

This absence of mediators increases the likelihood of security-based responses while diminishing opportunities for political dialogue or negotiated reform. It also reflects a broader shift: the state's waning reliance on political dialogue as a means of de-escalation, unlike in 2011, when the King quickly moved to offer constitutional concessions.

Seen from a wider perspective, this transformation reveals the erosion of political mediation channels and the collapse of trust between the state and the public. In 2011, despite facing repression, the February 20 Movement elicited a rapid institutional response and a royal address that acknowledged public demands. In contrast, the political reaction today appears vague and delayed, with security forces taking center stage.

The echoes of 2011 in the 2025 protests reveal the persistence of unresolved structural issues. But what sets today apart is that, barring isolated actions by fringe elements, the new generation is more digitally organized and even less trusting of political institutions. Meanwhile, the state confronts a regional and global landscape marked by fragility and volatility.

Between nonviolence and confrontation, the central question remains: Will the authorities opt for a political approach that rebuilds trust and opens dialogue? Or will a security-first strategy deepen the crisis and broaden its reach? One thing seems clear: responding to a new generation with outdated tactics is unlikely to defuse tensions and may only make them worse.



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