Moroccan government fears outbreak of mass protests

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As millions of people march in Egyptian cities and protests continue in Tunisia after the ouster of former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the Moroccan monarchy fears that it may be the next to face mass protests.

According to reports on Spanish public television, Moroccan troops are being sent towards major Moroccan cities, including Casablanca and Rabat, from their bases in the Western Sahara. The Moroccan embassy in Madrid denounced this report.

Pro-government newspapers in Morocco also criticized statements by dissident journalist Abubakr Jamai in French news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Jamai said that if protests broke out in Morocco, "the disparities in wealth are such that the rebellion will be much bloodier than in Tunisia."

However, fears of mass social protest are being raised even by members of Morocco's royal family. In an interview with the Spanish daily *El País*, Prince Mulay Hicham, the cousin of King Mohamed VI, warned: "Almost every authoritarian system will be affected by this wave of protest, Morocco will probably be no exception".

Asked about similarities between Tunisia and Morocco, the prince explained: "The gap between social classes undermines the legitimacy of political and economic system." He added that Morocco's political establishment itself is badly split: "If most social agents recognize the monarchy, they are, nevertheless, dissatisfied with the strong concentration of power in the hands of the Executive."

Rabat is trying to prevent an explosion of popular anger, by claiming that it will guarantee the stability of prices for basic products. The minister of Communications and spokesman of the government, Jalid Nasiri, declared that the stability of prices will be guaranteed through the Compensation Fund, a fund through which Morocco intervenes in the markets to lower prices of products such as flour, sugar, butane gas or gasoline.

The Moroccan government's fears are also shown by the huge police deployments it has organized against the small protests that have already broken out.

On Sunday night, hundreds of people participated in demonstrations in Fez and Tangier called by the anti-globalization group ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), in solidarity with protests in Egypt. They shouted, "Mubarak, Mubarak, Saudi Arabia awaits you"—in reference to the asylum Saudi Arabia gave Ben Ali.

On Monday a demonstration called by the Moroccan Association for Human Rights gathered 100 to 150 people in front of the Egyptian Embassy in Rabat. The protestors shouted "Mubarak go away" and "democracy for the Arab people." The small demonstration was surrounded by a huge police deployment.

The same day 40 teachers tried to immolate themselves in front of the Ministry of Education in Rabat, in protest of their sacking in 2008. According to Hafid Libi, leader of the National Coordination of the Non-Integrated Voluntary Teachers, these teachers had not received "any help whatsoever, and the state has not kept their promise of providing permanent jobs." Though police intervened to stop the burning, women were hospitalized with serious injuries.

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi last December in Tunisia began the wave of protests now shaking the Arab world.

Social conditions in Morocco are explosive. The country has emerged as a major source of cheap labor

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for European multinationals. Workers who are employed are highly exploited, while unemployment stands at 9 to 10 percent—though the real figure is thought to be far higher—and youth unemployment is officially around 20 per cent.

The Alaui family and Makhzen (the governing elite in Morocco composed of businessmen, wealthy landowners, tribal leaders, top-ranking military personnel and civil servants) have strong links with Western imperialism. France is Morocco's largest trading partner for both imports and exports, controlling more than 60 percent of foreign direct investment in Morocco, followed closely by Spain. Rabat also has close political ties to the US, from whom it purchases much of its weaponry. Morocco is considered one of the US's closest non-NATO allies.

Last Friday the King Mohammed VI traveled to France, returning to Morocco on Monday. Though *El País* claimed that he went on "vacation," other sources like *Hespress* declared that Mohamed VI went to France with a delegation of high-ranking security and military personnel and royal counselors.

French news magazine *Rue89* commented: "Why, even if Morocco currently seems to have avoided the protest wave touched off by the Tunisian events, did the Moroccan king feel the need to leave his kingdom and take refuge in his French residence? Moroccan journalist Ali Lmrabet, the former chief editor of the weekly *Le Journal*, indicates on Facebook that the Moroccan king is scheduled to have 'secret' meetings with [French president] Nicolas Sarkozy about the situation in Morocco."

The Spanish and French government are also fearful of the radicalizing impact that a revolutionary upsurge of the Moroccan masses might have at home. The Moroccan immigrant population is estimated at roughly 710,000 in Spain and 1,110,000 in France. However, popular protests could spread far beyond the Moroccan immigrant community.

In 2010, both Sarkozy and Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero undermined their democratic credentials by imposing social cuts and pension reforms over mass popular opposition, while using riot police to break strikes. Zapatero also made use of fascist-era "state of alarm" legislation to mobilize the army against striking air traffic controllers.

Millions of workers marched in strikes called against social austerity policies in both Spain and France last autumn.

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