

Protests erupt in Morocco after fish salesman killed

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Protests continued yesterday in the Moroccan city of Al Hoceima, where fish salesman Mouhcine Fikri, 31, was crushed to death on Friday after a conflict with Moroccan police in the city.

Tens of thousands of people had marched in protests in Al Hoceima, but also in Morocco's major cities including Casablanca, the capital Rabat, Fes, Marrakech, and Agadir, for Fikri's funeral over the weekend. Many compared Fikri's death to the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, the young merchant whose self-immolation in protest at the police confiscation of his fruits and vegetables triggered mass protests that brought down Tunisian President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali in 2011.

Fikri died in a confrontation with police and regulatory officials who tried to confiscate a batch of swordfish that he had bought. While catching swordfish in autumn is banned, Fikri nonetheless bought the catch, reportedly worth approximately \$11,000, with the knowledge of the port authorities, and was outraged when police and fisheries officials tried to confiscate the fish.

Fikri tried to negotiate with the authorities for several hours in order to avoid the destruction of the fish. Ultimately, however, they ordered his catch confiscated and destroyed, placing it in the trash compactor of a garbage truck. Fikri and several friends went into the compactor of the truck to retrieve his merchandise.

In a horrific scene captured by a bystander in a cell phone video, officials give the order to activate the trash compactor as Fikri tried to escape.

Pictures of the killing, with Fikri's head and one of his arms protruding from the compactor, rapidly circulated online, and mass protests erupted across Morocco on Sunday, the day of Fikri's funeral.

Protesters in Al Hoceima marched chanting slogans

including "Mouhcine is a martyr" and "Down with the Makhzen," the Moroccan political system led by the country's US- and European-backed monarchy of King Mohamed VI.

They walked from Al Hoceima, where Fikri worked, to the nearby municipality of Imzouren, where his family was from.

Marchers carried the Berber flag as a symbol of protest in the Rif region, which has often witnessed protests against the ethnically Arab monarchy. Al Hoceima was the site of a revolt against Spanish colonial rule in 1920 and an insurrection in 1958 against the closing of the border with neighboring Algeria, amid the Algerian war for independence from France. That uprising was crushed by a force of 30,000 men led by Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, the future Mohammed V, leading to the lasting marginalization of the region by the Moroccan regime.

Protests spread well beyond the Rif region, however, and turned into an expression of social anger at conditions in Morocco and political opposition to the Makhzen. "This could have happened in any city of the country, here al Al Hoceima it simply took on a greater symbolic dimension," Abdessamad Bencherif, a journalist from the city, told *Le Monde*.

Tens of thousands of people marched in the country's major cities, expressing their opposition to 'hogra,' that is, the impunity with which the monarchy and the authorities oppress the citizenry.

The explosive nature of class conflict in North Africa and its revolutionary implications are again coming to the surface of political life. With the mass revolutionary struggles of the Tunisian and Egyptian working class in 2011 fresh in memory, the Moroccan monarchy is for its part desperately seeking to maintain control of the situation and limit the expression of popular discontent.

King Mohamed VI sent Interior Minister Mohammed Hassad to present royal condolences to the family of the deceased. The Interior Ministry issued a statement pledging an investigation and declaring, “Our King doesn’t want such incidents to recur in our country. ... The investigation will make sure people are held accountable.” It announced that the king had ordered a “detailed and profound investigation.”

At the same time, Prime Minister Abdelilah Bekirane called for an end to protests against the killing. Benkirane’s party, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), expressed its “regrets for this regrettable incident,” telling its members not to respond “in any way” to calls for protests.

The Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), which is directly aligned with the monarchy, called it a “tragedy” and called for “punishing those who are responsible.”

Prosecutors have since arrested “two agents of the public authority, the marine fisheries delegate, the head of service of the marine fisheries delegation, and the chief doctor of the veterinary medicine service,” according to a communiqué they issued to the official MAP press agency.

All the indications are, however, that this investigation will predictably serve to whitewash not only the local officials, but above all the conditions of poverty and oppression imposed on the population by the monarchy—one of US and European imperialism’s most pliant tools in the region.

While witnesses at the scene accused officials of deliberately giving the order to activate the trash compactor while Fikri was inside, the prosecutor’s office claimed that “the acts that have been committed take on the character of involuntary manslaughter.”

Eleven people were ultimately remanded, charged with involuntary manslaughter and also “fraud in the preparation of public documents,” charging that the orders given to the garbage truck to destroy Fikri’s swordfish were not drafted in a legal manner.



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