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The Response of the Moroccan Legislature to the Jerada Crisis

Laila Elimam, Research Associate, Women's Rights in the Middle East Program

In December 2017, the inhabitants of Jerada, Morocco, began protesting the deaths of two brothers who were killed scrapping coal in the abandoned mines. Their deaths are an occurrence that is far too familiar in the mining town, where young men repeatedly risk—and lose—their lives in the mines out of desperation and lack of employment options. In fact, the protests and ire of Jerada's residents echo the frustrations felt throughout Morocco's rural districts, including al-Hoceima, which experienced its own protests during the last year. These sentiments also echo the grievances of citizens across the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), who have continued to struggle economically. Dire economic conditions have been amplified by the strict International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures imposed in exchange for loan packages in Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and more recently, Lebanon.

In Egypt, for instance, high inflation and unemployment rates have resulted in exorbitant price increases of goods and services. Meanwhile in Tunisia, demonstrations sprouted up throughout the country in early 2018, with citizens demanding that the government revoke the Finance Act, which increased taxes and fuel prices.¹ More recently in Tunisia's southern phosphate-mining city of Gafsa, workers and youth marched in protest of the worsening economic conditions.² Demonstrations also emerged in Jordan in response to price increases³ and in Algeria,

where teachers and doctors demanded higher wages.⁴

In the past, much attention has focused on the responses of MENA regimes to displays of protest—particularly those of violence—with little attention afforded to the roles of legislative representatives. One exception includes the responses of deputies of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which welcomed labor protests in 2008—albeit outside of the legislative arena—in the textile-producing town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra as signs of political dissent.⁵ Other researchers have addressed the roles of the leftist Worker's Party⁶ in Tunisia, which historically was responsive to displays of discontent by workers.⁷ Yet few analyses have looked beyond these cases to better gauge the reactions of MPs in the MENA region. This issue brief will examine the responses of deputies from the Moroccan House of Representatives to the Jerada protests by assessing their legislative activity and questions posed to the government.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES IN THE MENA AND THE MOROCCAN CASE

Many scholars increasingly question the roles of legislative assemblies and electoral processes in the MENA given that many incumbents seem to have little or no capacity to push for meaningful democratic reforms.⁹ One of the most prevalent explanations for the existence



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of democratic institutions is that autocrats use these institutions as tools to stabilize their regimes—namely by distributing rents to co-opt elites that may pose a threat to their rule. In this way, electoral institutions actually offer incumbents greater permanence by allowing them to monitor challengers and shielding them from threats.¹⁰ This argument suggests that legislative assemblies in the region are rubber-stamp institutions that are characterized by a lack of autonomy or policy impact.

However, this approach fails to acknowledge the connections between legislative representatives and constituents. As stipulated by Geddes¹¹ and Lust-Okar,¹² legislative elites tend to have direct relationships with constituents since deputies can be a source of services for citizens.¹³ Moreover, legislators in the MENA region can assume a mediating role given the lack of space for dialogue between citizens and the regime.¹⁴ In particular, the responsiveness of legislative representatives may contribute toward diffusing public anger or displays of protest if constituents feel they are being acknowledged. This relationship may contribute toward stabilizing the regime as well through less direct means.

Morocco offers an interesting case for examining legislative dynamics in the MENA region more closely. The country has held multiparty elections since 1963.¹⁵ Its political system includes two legislative houses: the House of Councilors—which is the upper house with 120 indirectly elected members—and the House of Representatives, or the lower house, with 395 deputies. The lower house has two quota provisions¹⁶ formalized in the 2011 electoral law as part of a series of reforms introduced in response to sweeping popular unrest across the country.¹⁷ As in the rest of the MENA and in other authoritarian regimes, scholars argue that Morocco's electoral system is a way for the monarchy to co-opt elites¹⁸ and that the political party system suffers from "fragmentation."¹⁹ While there are many parties—for example, there were 32 parties competing for seats in the 2016 elections—and they have indeed struggled in the past

to form cohesive coalitions, the legislature and political party system are relatively well established, particularly compared to the assemblies of neighboring countries. Denoeux and Desfosses²⁰ argue that the Moroccan parliament deserves "more credit" given its performance and the context it operates in.

Morocco's lower house performs a dual role as a monitoring and legislating institution.²¹ To perform its monitoring function, MPs ask questions to cabinet members and the government on a range of topics to hold them accountable for their performances. The process of asking questions is relatively accessible to representatives. Though they may not necessarily be proactively sponsoring legislation, MPs have the opportunity to respond to events impacting citizens through posing oral and written questions. In contrast, passing bills involves consideration by the specialized lower house committee and deliberation by the upper house, before being returned to the lower house and eventually to the monarchy for final ratification.²²

Research by Shalaby and Aydogan²³ indicates high levels of congruency between the issue priorities of citizens and legislators based on public opinion data and oral questions asked by MPs. They find less congruence in proposed bills, owing to the more complicated process and the fact that bills are more frequently driven by the monarchy. Their findings also point to the necessity of moving beyond the narrative of legislative assemblies as rubber-stamp institutions; in incidents such as the Jerada event, the question becomes if and how deputies reacted to the event and the implications for the regime, deputies, and citizens.

THE JERADA INCIDENT AND INITIAL LEGISLATIVE RESPONSES

The Jerada protests are regarded as an extension of the Rif Movement or Hirak al-Shaabi, an activist movement that started in 2016 in al-Hoceima, a region north of Jerada, in response to the death of a fishmonger who was killed trying to

retrieve his confiscated fish from authorities. Like Jerada, demonstrators in al-Hoceima were met with police violence and arrests. To mollify protesters and at the urges of the palace, authorities proposed a major development project meant to offer more employment opportunities in al-Hoceima. Officials claim that the project is on track,²⁴ though progress is questionable.

Authorities likewise proposed a development project for Jerada earlier in 2018. Nonetheless, the magnitude of demonstrations in the mining town has escalated. In early February and March, two more men died in the coal mines, prompting additional protests and demands for “economic alternatives.”²⁵ According to the Moroccan High Commission for Planning, the Oriental region where Jerada is located suffers from an unemployment rate of 17.1 percent, compared to the 10.2 percent national average, while estimates put Jerada’s unemployment rate at 32 percent.²⁶ In March, the Ministry of Interior prohibited demonstrations in the city, leading authorities to treat protesters with violence and arrests.

The Jerada incident, which occurred on December 22, 2017, was met with prompter and more salient responses from legislative members in comparison to the al-Hoceima events. During the televised oral questioning session on December 25, 2017, which was the first legislative meeting since the Jerada incident, several deputies who voiced their party’s stance on the Law on Violence against Women²⁷ commented on the deaths of the two men. The most assertive response came from Buthayna Karuri, speaking on behalf of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), who questioned the status of the social development program of 1998, asked for immediate government involvement, and suggested the creation of a fact-finding mission and investigative committee. Her appeals were echoed by other MPs within the chamber, although they issued fewer concrete calls for action.

The second agenda topic during the same session—the Development of Mountainous and Rural Areas—offered deputies an opportunity to frame their commentary and questions in light of the Jerada incident. The

speaker of the assembly opened the floor for three oral questions, which were followed by an opportunity for open commentary in response to the prime minister’s government performance report. Though the three initial questions came from the parties holding the greatest number of seats in the assembly—the PJD, the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), and Istiqlal—subsequent commentary came from across the political spectrum with seven of the 12 legislative parties participating in the debate. Many deputies emphasized the need to provide services and create employment opportunities on a broader scale in rural areas given the presence of rural communities in their provinces. For example, Sharqawi Zanaydi of the Socialist Union for Popular Forces (USFP) commented on the employment needs of rural areas, adding that the victims of the Jerada incident are the most significant evidence of this.

QUESTIONS AND LEGISLATIVE BILLS

In addition to the oral questions asked during the televised session, 20 deputies—eight women and 12 men—and one party group submitted oral and written questions to cabinet members and the prime minister. Table 1 includes the questions posed, the names of the deputies who asked each question, and details about their backgrounds. From December 26, 2017, to the end of April 2018, a total of 29 questions were posed associated with the incident, including inquiries about the socioeconomic conditions in the town and surrounding region, the emergence of protests and security responses, and government action to prevent similar future incidents.

Ibtissam Meras, a member of the USFP who was elected through a gender quota, submitted the first written question addressing the Jerada incident on December 26, 2017, four days after it occurred. In January 2018, the majority of the remaining questions were asked in the weeks immediately following the deaths of the two men and the onset of protests. As displayed in Table 1, the government responded to less than one-fourth of the questions on January 8, 2018. Most of the

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The activities of legislators in Morocco suggest that parliament's function and purpose extend beyond solely serving the regime.

questions pertained to the government's actions to address Jerada's economic hardships and its plans for preventing similar incidents from occurring in the future. The answered questions coincided with the development of a socioeconomic plan involving the Minister of Energy, Mining, and Sustainable Development and local leaders from the Jerada region,²⁸ which may have incentivized the government to be more responsive.

The questions posed came from across the political spectrum, indicating the importance of the incident for the majority of political parties. Most of the questions came from PJD members, followed by members from the Istiqlal party. Almost half of the questions addressed the broader implications of this incident. For instance, al-Kibeer Qada, a member of Istiqlal, asked about employment opportunities for former workers of the closed mines in the Eastern Province, while Nur al-Din Madayin adopted the rhetoric of protesters and questioned the government about potential "economic alternatives" for the miners of Jerada. Madayin represents the al-Hoceima district and was likely sympathetic to the grievances of Jerada's residents. Two later questions addressed the security situation and the Amnesty International report about the protests. The report called on Moroccan authorities to refrain from using "excessive force" against demonstrators,²⁹ and the government responded defensively, stating that the report "lacks fairness."³⁰ The Jerada issue is a sensitive topic in Morocco, and the fact that the MPs elected to address the highly unflattering report and security situation revealed a broader awareness of the situation and suggested a role beyond simply serving the regime.

Interestingly, about 41 percent of the questions came from seven female and three male deputies elected either through the gender or youth quotas. Furthermore, two-thirds of these questions were posed by six youth-quota MPs, split between males and females, while the remaining one-third of the questions were posed by gender-quota MPs. Previous research examining quotas at the global level has debunked the notion that gender-

quota candidates are subpar in "quality" compared to their nonquota counterparts.³¹ However, despite these empirical findings, negative impressions associated with quota candidates in Morocco³² and elsewhere persist.³³ Though the results are too preliminary to make definitive conclusions about the substantive contributions of quota candidates in the Jerada case, an initial look at the characteristics of the deputies asking questions points to the active role that quota representatives play. Indeed, this becomes particularly noteworthy given that the remaining questions were asked by nine male deputies, one female deputy, and a group of MPs from the PJD. However, most questions posed by female representatives in the quota group—whether elected through the gender or youth quota—were written, while their male colleagues presented oral questions.

In contrast to the number of questions asked by MPs, there was much less activity in proposing bills related to the Jerada situation, likely owing to the smaller proportion of legislative bills in general and the lengthier process involved. The Istiqlal party authored a draft bill for the creation of an "Agency for the Development of Rural and Border Areas" to replace the existing "Fund for Development of Rural and Mountainous Areas." The proposed bill, which was forwarded to the Committee of Productive Sectors on February 9, 2018, is the only piece of legislation that is somewhat relevant to the events in Jerada, though it is unlikely that it was drafted solely in response to the incident. Rather, it is more probable that the bill was drawn up in response to the socioeconomic challenges and civil discontent in the rest of the country, including al-Hoceima and Jerada. However, the existence of the proposed bill demonstrates that the assembly is trying to fulfill its role as a legislating institution.

TABLE 1 — MP QUESTIONS ABOUT THE JERADA INCIDENT

Political Party	Date	Question Topic*	Question Type	Re-Elected	MP Names	Gender	MP District**
Authentic and Modernity	Jan 3, 2018	Circumstances of the collapse of the coal mine in Jerada	Oral	No	Muhammad Shruru	Male	al-Khamissat – Olmas
	Jan 17, 2018	Social problems in Jerada	Oral	No	Amal 'Arbush	Female	Quota (Y)
	Mar 29, 2018	Amnesty International Report regarding Jerada protests	Oral	No	Muhammad Shruru	Male	al-Khamissat – Olmas
Constitutional Union	Jan 4, 2018	Protests in Jerada	Oral	No	Mustafa Baytash	Male	Quota (Y)
	Jan 4, 2018	Reality of the mines in Jerada	Oral	No	Mustafa Baytash	Male	Quota (Y)
	Jan 8, 2018	Government's plan for local development and economic recovery	Oral	No	Tawfiq Kamil	Male	Ibn Masik
Dynamic	Jan 5, 2018	The events in Jerada and actions taken	Oral	Yes	Muhammad Mabda'	Male	al-Faqiya Bin Salih
Istiqlal	Dec 28, 2017	Creating employment opportunities in the Eastern Province	Oral	No	al-Kibeer Qada	Male	Fajij
	Jan 3, 2018	Living conditions in Jerada	Oral	Yes	Nur al-Din Madyan	Male	al-Hoceimah
	Jan 8, 2018	Living conditions in Jerada	Oral	Yes	Nur al-Din Madyan	Male	al-Hoceimah
	Mar 28, 2018	Economic alternatives for the mines of Jerada	Oral	Yes	Nur al-Din Madyan	Male	al-Hoceimah
	Mar 29, 2018	Status of Jerada's miners	Oral	Yes	Nur al-Din Madyan	Male	al-Hoceimah
Justice And Development	Dec 28, 2017	Mines in Jerada	Oral	Yes	Su'ad al-Hajrawi	Female	al-Fahs, Anjir
	Jan 2, 2018	Death of two citizens in a coal mine in Jerada	Written	No	Bouthayna Karuri	Female	Quota (G)
	Jan 9, 2018	The status of workers and miners in Morocco	Oral	Yes	Idris Seqli 'Adawi	Male	Meknes
	Jan 15, 2018	Investigating the tragedy of Jerada's open mines	Oral	No	Nawfal al-Nasiri	Male	Quota (Y)
	Jan 15, 2018	Jerada's mine workers	Oral	Yes	Muhammad al-'Uthmani	Male	Wajda-Anjad
	Jan 16, 2018	Expediting the organizational text for mining laws	Oral	Yes	Muhammad Khayi	Male	Tanja-Asilah
	Jan 18, 2018	Expediting the organizational text for mining laws	Written	Yes	Muhammad Khayi	Male	Tanja-Asilah
	Feb 6, 2018	Improving working conditions of searchers in the mines	Oral	No	Nawfal al-Nasiri	Male	Quota (Y)
Mar 26, 2018	Recent developments in Jerada	Written	No	Maymuna Aftati	Female	Quota (G)	
Multiple Parties	Apr 12, 2018	Events in Jerada	Oral	No	Abdullah Hamal	Team (four M, one F)	Wajda-Anjad, Quota (G), Burkan, al-Nadur, Fajij
No Affiliation	Dec 27, 2017	Social problems in Jerada	Written	No	Maymuna Aftati	Male	Rabat – Mohet
	Mar 23, 2018	Exploitation of mines in the East	Written	No	Mustafa al-Quwri	Male	Rabat – Mohet
Progress and Socialism	Jan 5, 2018	Government's actions after two citizens died in Jerada's mines	Oral	No	Faruk al-Tahiri	Female	Quota (G)
	Mar 20, 2018	Security in Jerada	Written	No	Mustafa Zayti	Female	Quota (Y)
Socialist	Dec 26, 2017	Death of two brothers inside one of Jerada's coal mines	Written	No	Omar Balafraj	Female	Quota (G)
	Jan 3, 2018	Urgent development programs for regional areas similar to Jerada	Oral	No	Omar Balafraj	Male	Quota (Y)
	Mar 26, 2018	The marginalization of Jerada	Written	No	Aishah Lablak	Female	Quota (Y)

* Question topics are translated from Arabic. The data on legislative activities was acquired from the official website of the Moroccan House of Representatives, http://www.chambrederesrepresentants.ma/ar_.

** Quota (Y) and Quota (G) refer to MPs elected through the youth and gender quotas, respectively.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Previous literature³⁴ describes the presence of legislative institutions in the MENA in terms of their utility for the ruling regime and negligible impact on policy. However, the activities of legislators in Morocco suggest that parliament's function and purpose extend beyond solely serving the regime. The MPs' responses in the aftermath of the Jerada incident indicate that the assembly is not a rubber-stamp institution. Rather, legislative representatives actively voiced their concerns following the incident, which has implications for the regime, deputies, and citizens.

First, with the continued implementation of IMF austerity measures and renewed displays of discontent, the regime would be wise to make better use of its existing institutions to reach its citizens. Although Prime Minister Said al-'Uthmani visited Jerada in February 2018 to address the crisis and present the government's proposed development plan, security forces cracked down on protestors in March 2018, resulting in hundreds of injuries. In April 2018, the Minister of Interior, Abdelouafi Laftit, accused the Justice and Charity Party, the Democratic Way Party, and the Moroccan Association for Human Rights of being violent "instigators" of the protests who are adverse to any resolution.³⁵ As a result, some activists in Jerada expressed skepticism toward the government's development plan. Thus, the regime needs to refrain from employing violent security measures and aggressive rhetoric. Instead, it should focus on building trust in its state institutions, particularly the legislature, since it serves as a link between citizens and the state. This is especially important given that similarly hostile approaches dominated the landscape throughout the MENA region before and during the Arab Spring uprisings.

Second, to further foster trust, the government needs to be more responsive to the questions of representatives. Cabinet members and the prime minister are required to respond to questions within 20 and 30 days, respectively. However, this rarely happens in reality; for the small

sample of questions presented in Table 1, the government's response rate is dismal. The low response rate is also evident in our larger dataset of legislative questions posed from 2012 to 2017 on policy issues besides the Jerada incident. Though beyond the scope of this research, it would be interesting to examine how deputies follow up on unanswered questions.

Third, MPs can enhance their roles through increasing their legislating activity. Indeed, bills signed into law are usually those proposed by the monarchy rather than the legislature, which may discourage MPs from proposing bills and make them more inclined to concentrate their efforts on asking questions. However, when examining past proposed bills, it seems that legislating can promote opportunities for collaboration and deliberation among deputies and across parties. This becomes increasingly relevant given the crosscutting nature of policy issues associated with economic challenges.

Ultimately, this issue brief shows that deputies concerned with the Jerada incident came from diverse backgrounds in terms of quota status, gender, and party affiliation, highlighting the intersectionality of the crisis. Their active responses to the incident indicate that they are interested in holding the government accountable and finding solutions for the difficulties their constituents face. This suggests that MPs are not merely interested in gaining rents from the regime, especially given the pervasiveness of economic hardships across their districts, and can in fact serve as channels for dialogue between the regime and citizens.

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AUTHORS

Laila Elimam is a research associate in the Baker Institute's [Women's Rights in the Middle East program](#), and she researches Middle East and U.S. politics; criminal justice, health, and food policy; and international development. She holds a master's degree in public policy from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a bachelor's degree in political science from the American University in Cairo.

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