Can Morocco’s Leaders Weather the Political Storm of Teachers’ Strikes?

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Editor’s Note: This article is part of an ongoing series about education policy in various countries around the world.

Thousands of teachers went on strike and marched for better working conditions in Morocco in recent months. The waves of demonstrations, which occasionally turned violent as police used water cannons to disperse the protesters, have since subsided as teachers have returned to classes. But there is potential for further unrest if the government doesn’t meet the teachers’ key demand: being accorded full civil servant status. In an email interview with WPR, Aboubakr Jamai, dean of the School of Business and International Relations at the Institute for American Universities in Aix-en-Provence, France, discusses the grievances that drove the teachers’ protests and the extent of their political impact.

World Politics Review: What is driving the Moroccan teachers’ strikes and protests? Are the protesters mainly highlighting long-running grievances, or have new issues cropped up recently?

Aboubakr Jamai: The teachers’ strikes and protests were triggered by their rejection of new employment contracts that the government has been rolling out over the past few years. Moroccan teachers have traditionally been considered public servants, but the new contracted positions essentially take away that status. The striking teachers want to be classified as civil servants, so that they can benefit from the job security, retirement pension schemes and mobility that this status confers.

Under the new system, teachers would be recruited by regional academic centers, not directly by the Ministry of Education. The government claims that this is part of a decentralization process to make the educational system more responsive to local conditions and demands. For the strikers, however, the fuzzy language in the new contracts did not offer the same guarantees as full civil servant status. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank often admonish Morocco for the size of its public wages...
relative to its GDP, and this triggered fears among teachers that the new system was actually designed to allow the state to fire them more easily.

The teachers also fear that the new contracts would negatively affect their prospects for transferring to schools in their preferred locations. Newly hired teachers expect to be assigned positions in unappealing remote areas, but they have generally been guaranteed transfers to locations more to their liking later in their career. Under the new system, which delegates transfer decisions from the national level to the regional level, teachers worry that it will be harder to get their preferred postings.

The protesters’ anger is also fueled by the fact that they are being subjected to this new contract system without adequate knowledge of how it will affect their jobs. They feel shorthanded relative to other, better endowed sectors of the public sector, mainly the security apparatus and its related agencies, whose employees have seen their lot vastly improve since the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world.

**WPR: How has the government sought to address the teachers’ concerns, and how have its responses been received?**

**Jamaa:** The government’s response to the teachers’ movement evolved over time. When the protests broke out in February, the government’s initial position was to hold fast. It only softened its stance when widespread anti-government protests broke out in neighboring Algeria. Seeing the strength of the protests in Algeria (https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/27634/bouteflika-may-have-stepped-aside-but-the-generals-really-running-algeria-won-t), Morocco’s government gave in to most of the teachers’ demands, except their direct hiring as civil servants. But that was not enough for the protesters, whose defiance was informed by what they saw as a lack of credibility and fairness on the part of Moroccan authorities.

Protesters fear that the government is simply trying to ride out the current phase of social mobilization, which includes the possibility of contagion from the much broader Algerian protests, and then renege on its promises. This fear is rooted in the government’s failure to honor some of the promises for reforms that it made in the heat of the massive protests of 2011, known in Morocco as the February 20 Movement.

The teachers’ protest movement has proved both resilient and democratic in nature. In April, the government made a series of concessions and reached an agreement with negotiators to stop their strike. It thought the matter settled, but the agreement was rejected in a vote by the regional chapters of the protest movement for not going far enough. Finally, the strikers decided to resume their work to avoid an “annee blanche,” or lost year, for their students. But they threatened not to distribute grades if their demand to be part of the civil service is not met.

**WPR: Is there potential for these strikes to have a broader political impact on Prime Minister Saadeddine Othmani’s government?**
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Jamai: These waves of sectoral strikes have largely come and gone without any major impact on the government, so there is little chance that Othmani will fall because of them. Ultimately, the political impact of these strikes is limited by structural factors having to do with Morocco’s political system.

Morocco is not a democracy. It has political parties, but they are subservient to the king, Mohammed VI, to varying degrees. On one end of the political spectrum are royalist parties, which are largely content with the monarchy’s direct or indirect control of all branches of government. These parties do not function democratically, as their leadership has to be appointed by the king.

On the other end of the spectrum, most parties advocate for a parliamentary monarchy where the king functions only as a figurehead. Othmani’s party, the Party of Justice and Development, or PJD, is somewhat in the middle. It is content with the current constitution, which sanctions the king’s grip on all three branches of government. But it also has an anti-corruption platform and its leadership is democratically elected.

The royal court only tolerated the PJD’s victory in the post-Arab Spring legislative elections, in 2011, because of the popular pressure that fueled the February 20 Movement. Meanwhile, the more ardently pro-democracy parties chose not to participate in the election. The PJD garnered the most seats in parliament not because it upheld the demonstrators’ demands, but because it was the most pro-democratic of the contending parties.

As a result, the PJD had to lead a coalition composed mostly of political parties which opposed the February 20 Movement’s demands, and which continue to try and roll back any other concessions the monarchy made to placate the protesters in 2011. Consequently, the PJD has been in a tug of war with its coalition partners (https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/21475/can-morocco-s-islamists-survive-the-current-political-impasse) for the past eight years.

With the teachers’ protests, the coalition is in a difficult position. The education reforms are deemed modern and rational not only by the World Bank and the IMF but also by some of the country’s modernizing elites. At the same time, many Moroccans see the reforms as anti-working class, and if it stays the course, the ruling coalition risks being seen as subservient to international financial institutions. This conundrum is even more acute for the PJD. It is dealing with unreliable coalition partners, which are willing to paint it as too populist, and hence unworthy of governing, if it gives in too much to the protesters’ demands.