Tomorrow's Affairs
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Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Gen Z protests against corruption and inequality are shaking Morocco

Demonstrations in more than a dozen cities have jolted Morocco for weeks, with the young people behind them showing they can translate digital discontent into a real-world movement that authorities can't ignore.

The North African nation is the latest to be rocked by "Gen Z" protests against corruption, lack of opportunity and business as usual. New protests are expected Saturday.

Similar movements have risen in countries such as Madagascar, Kenya, Peru and Nepal. They differ in origin but share a common refusal to go through institutions like political parties or unions to be heard.

In Morocco, anger has boiled over contrasts between government spending on stadiums in the lead-up to the 2030 FIFA World Cup and a subpar health system that lags behind countries with similarly sized economies.

Meet the protesters

A leaderless collective called Gen Z 212 — named after Morocco's dialing code — is the engine behind the protests. Members debate strategy on Discord, a chat app popular with gamers and teens. The core group has about 180,000 members, but spinoffs have also sprouted, organizing demonstrations in towns independently.

Like other nations swept by Gen Z protests, Morocco is experiencing a youth bulge, with more than half of the population under 35.

Yet, as the country pours billions into infrastructure and tourism, unemployment for Moroccans ages 15-24 has climbed to 36%.

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And with opportunity lacking, more than half of Moroccans under 35 say they have considered emigrating, according to a June survey from non-partisan research network Afrobarometer.

When demonstrations turned violent earlier this month, officials said most participants were minors and rights groups said many detained were under 18.

What they are protesting

Morocco is Africa's most visited country, appealing to tourists from around the world with its medieval palaces, bustling markets and sweeping mountain and desert landscapes.

But not far from tourist routes, the daily reality for most of Morocco's 37 million people includes soaring costs of living and stagnating wages.

The North African Kingdom has made significant strides in lifting standards of living, but development has been uneven and critics say it has exacerbated inequities.

Morocco boasts Africa's only high-speed rail line and is constructing seven new stadiums and renovating seven others in preparation for the World Cup.

It plans to spend more than $5 billion on infrastructure for the event, some from the private sector. Yet with a monthly minimum wage of around $300, many languish in poverty in areas where roads are unpaved, hospitals lack doctors and classrooms are underfunded and overcrowded.

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Morocco has only 7.7 medical professionals per 10,000 inhabitants and far fewer in parts of the south and east where protests have become most heated.

The public health system provides more than 80% of care, but accounts for only 40% of

spending, with the rest coming from private or out-of-pocket costs.

Before Gen Z 212, localized protests against regional inequities and government priorities erupted, including in Al Haouz, where many remain in tents more than two years after a deadly 2023 earthquake.

Anger boiled in September after eight women died giving birth in a public hospital in the coastal city of Agadir. Despite its renovated airport and reputation as a destination for tourists, the city is the capital of one of Morocco's poorest provinces where residents have decried a lack of doctors and quality medical care.

Protesters, angry over corruption, have likened the government to a mafia and targeted Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch and Health Minister Amine Tahraoui, his former business associate.

Akhannouch, one of Morocco's richest men, controls most of the country's gas stations, and one of his companies recently won controversial government contracts for new desalination projects.

Morocco's business interests, including the royal family's investment fund Al Mada, have also projected substantial profits from World Cup-related developments, including new stadiums, train lines and hotels, according to the magazine Jeune Afrique.

Protesters have chanted "Stadiums are here, but where are the hospitals?" in a jab at Morocco's spending on spectacle projects for the World Cup and what many see as the government's blindness to everyday hardship.

"Freedom, dignity and social justice" is another slogan carried over from past movements denouncing limited political freedoms and economic exclusion, without offering specific demands for reform.

The protesters' demands

Gen Z 212 published a letter addressed to King Mohammed VI asking him to dismiss the government and corrupt political parties, release detainees and convene a government forum to hold officials accountable.

The political demands diverged from earlier nebulous calls for dignity and social justice, and reflected a broad sentiment that Morocco has not made serious strides to overcome problems that the king vowed to address during 2017 mass demonstrations. At the time, he acknowledged development had not adequately trickled down to benefit all.

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Though the king is the country's highest authority, Gen Z protesters directed their ire at government officials and called on him to oversee reforms. Many on the streets shouted: "The people want the King to intervene."

In an address to Parliament this month, the king defended Morocco's vision for the future, arguing that large-scale projects and social programs can advance together. He mirrored some of the protesters' grievances but didn't address the movement directly.

"Social justice is not a temporary priority," he said. "There should be no contradiction or competition between major national projects and social programs, as both share the same goal: developing the country and improving the living conditions of citizens wherever they may be."

How the government has responded

Security forces have alternated between crackdown and retreat.

Riot police and plainclothes officers arrested demonstrators en masse on the weekend of

Sept. 27 and 28. Police in a small town outside of Agadir fired on demonstrators they claimed were storming one of their posts in early October, killing three, and a police van rammed into protesters in the eastern city of Oujda, injuring one.

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But elsewhere, security forces eased their presence, standing aside as rioters and looters set cars ablaze and smashed storefronts.

Moroccan courts have handed down a string of convictions tied to the protests, with sentences ranging from four to 20 years for vandalism and incitement, according to Human Rights Watch.

After the initial protests, Akhannouch and several of his Cabinet members said the government was open to dialogue with protesters and suggested fortifying existing hospitals with additional staff and opening new medical facilities.

But as Moroccans watch stadiums being built in a matter of months, promised changes have rung hollow to many demonstrators since no official has yet proposed redirecting stadium funds to social services.

“The government is taking patchwork measures to ease the pressure," Youssef, a 27-year-old demonstrator, said. "Their reforms will take years.”