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Beyond the Streets:

A Reading of the Structural Causes of Protests in Morocco

الحركة النسوية للعدالة الاقتصادية الايكولوجية و التنمية في الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا
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Introduction

Morocco is witnessing a new wave of protests that transcends the realm of spontaneous or momentary anger. Led largely by a younger generation identifying itself as Generation Z, this movement signals a deeper social rupture. While it appears on the surface as digital mobilization driven by social media, it reflects a fundamental transformation in social consciousness, one that views social demands not as pleas to the state but as inalienable rights.

This generation's demands, for quality healthcare, accessible education, decent employment, and dignity, reflect the erosion of a social contract that once tied citizens to the state. Their calls for justice are not appeals for generosity from those in power but claims to legitimate and inherent social entitlements.

Although the tools of mobilization are new, the grievances are deeply rooted. They are the cumulative outcome of decades of structural and economic deterioration that began with the adoption of neoliberal "reform" programs in the 1980s under the supervision of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Over time, Morocco's economy has shifted from serving social needs to being evaluated through global indicators of "growth," "openness," and "macroeconomic stability." These reforms, presented as technical tools for development, have, in practice, been political instruments reshaping the relationship between the state and society. They rest on the premise that development can only be achieved through market mechanisms, while the role of the state is reduced to regulation, security, and limited redistribution.

This long neoliberal transformation lies at the heart of Morocco's political and social crisis. The protests reopen a fundamental question: what kind of state has Morocco become—a social state that ensures welfare, or a financial enterprise managing crises through debt and austerity? The answer to this question exposes the collapse of the fragile balance the state has attempted to maintain since the 2011 uprisings through programs of "protection," "support," and "reform." That equilibrium, built on debt-financed measures rather than genuine transformation, has imploded from within, revealing profound inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power. The official narrative of "stability" now functions as a mask for stagnation and exclusion.

1. The Starting Point: From Healthcare Tragedy to Social Outcry

The current wave of protests began within the healthcare sector following a tragic incident that saw the deaths of eight pregnant women in a single hospital, an event that reignited national outrage. While official discourse continues to glorify state "achievements," this tragedy laid bare the gap between narrative and lived reality.

According to Numbeo's 2025 Global Index, Morocco ranked 94th out of 99 countries in healthcare quality, scoring only 47 points. This crisis is not accidental; it stems from decades of deliberate neglect of public healthcare and the redirection of investments toward the private sector. Such systematic weakening has normalized privatization, deepening both class and regional inequality.

2. The World Bank, the IMF, and the Reshaping of the Moroccan Economy

To understand the current crisis, it is necessary to trace the policies that have shaped the Moroccan economy since the 1980s. Public debt has been the central mechanism enforcing austerity, leading to reduced social spending and the privatization of essential sectors. Like many countries of the Global South, Morocco has prioritized debt repayment over social development, turning debt itself into an instrument of dependency.

The core pillars of Morocco's neoliberal reforms include:

- Privatization of public enterprises.
- Reductions in spending on health, education, and other social services.
- Adoption of agricultural and industrial policies oriented toward exports.
- Liberalization of prices and removal of subsidies.
- Restructuring of the labor system in favor of investors.
- Strengthening the independence of the Central Bank and prioritizing fiscal balance over social justice.

These measures were formally adopted in 1993 under the Washington Consensus and have persisted through successive "poverty reduction" and "modernization" programs, which in practice deepened the same structural trajectory.

In reality, these policies neither alleviated debt burdens nor generated equitable growth. Instead, debt increased, public services deteriorated, and inequality widened. The 2011 Constitution codified the free-market orientation and limited state intervention in social affairs, institutionalizing neoliberalism.

During the February 20 Movement of 2011, the Moroccan state absorbed the protests not by reversing neoliberal policies but by embedding them further under reformist rhetoric. In education, the 1999 National Charter for Education and Training laid the foundation for a "neoliberal school" model aligned with market needs. In health, the 1999 decree on financing, drafted according to World Bank recommendations, introduced cost recovery and opened the door to the commodification of care. Agriculture followed the same path through the Green Morocco Plan, prioritizing export crops over food sovereignty and security.

3. Debt and Dependency: Morocco's Structural Reliance on International Financial Institutions

Since 2010, Morocco has deepened its engagement with international lenders through large financing arrangements under the IMF's Precautionary and Liquidity Line (PLL), amounting to billions of dollars. Despite these programs' promises of "resilience," they have not produced social justice or inclusive growth. Instead, debt dependency has intensified.

By 2024, public debt accounted for around 69% of GDP. Roughly two-thirds of this is domestic, held by local banks and pension funds, while the remainder is external, owed largely to multilateral and bilateral creditors. The World Bank alone holds more than one-third of Morocco's external debt. France and other Western states maintain major shares, perpetuating postcolonial financial hierarchies.

Debt repayments are made at the expense of essential services. Austerity and subsidy cuts ensure continued repayment, turning debt into both an economic and political instrument—a tool for governing through scarcity and dependence.

4. Green Debt: The New Frontier of Financial Control

In recent years, Morocco has rebranded itself as a leader in the "green transition." Projects like the Noor Ouarzazate solar complex and large desalination plants are presented as national achievements. Yet beneath this image lies the same financial logic that has governed Morocco since the 1980s, debt-led development under the guise of sustainability.

Morocco entered the green bond market in 2016, when the Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy issued bonds worth 1.15 billion dirhams to finance the Ouarzazate solar project. The National Railways Office followed with a 2-billion-dirham issuance, joined later by World Bank and EBRD loans labeled “sustainable financing.” In practice, most of these loans refinanced existing debt or covered fiscal shortfalls rather than creating genuine ecological transformation.

The result is a paradox: debt contracted in the name of the environment now deepens social and ecological fragility. Massive solar and desalination projects consume millions of cubic meters of water annually, despite Morocco’s chronic water stress. The per capita share of renewable water resources has fallen below 500 cubic meters a year, barely one-fifth of what it was decades ago. Dams like Al Massira, once among the largest in the country, now retain only 3% of their original capacity due to drought and overuse. The “green transition” thus becomes a continuation of privatization and financialization, wrapped in the moral language of sustainability.

5. The Social Cost of Economic Choices

By 2025, Morocco ranked 120th of 192 countries in the UN Human Development Index, reflecting the cumulative impact of neoliberal governance on social welfare. Debt service consumes nearly three times the education budget and a third more than health expenditures, surpassing even defense spending.

Public health allocations rarely exceed 8–12% of national expenditure, well below WHO standards. Incremental increases do not meet growing demand driven by population growth and the costs of privatized care. Programs funded by international lenders reinforce market logic rather than ensuring universal access.

Public services are being reshaped to function under quasi-private models. Teachers are now hired under regional contracts without job security, while public health workers face similar precarity under new “hybrid” systems. In agriculture, once the backbone of rural livelihoods, the Green Morocco Plan (2008–2018) invested over 100 billion dirhams but widened inequality: food imports reached 42 billion dirhams while exports were less than half that. Small farmers lost land and livelihoods, accelerating rural impoverishment and migration.

6. Social Protection or Market Management?

Since 2020, Morocco has introduced a new social protection framework described as the foundation of a “social state.” Yet the policies remain rooted in neoliberal logic. Most funding is external: of the

29 billion dirhams allocated by 2025, a substantial portion comes from loans and grants rather than redistribution.

In June 2025, the government approved over $320 million in additional loans to digitize social registries and expand targeted assistance. The Unified Social Registry, a digital database determining eligibility through algorithms, illustrates how social policy has been subsumed by technical management. It systematically excludes informal workers and precarious groups who lack digital documentation.

Rather than ensuring universal rights, this model administers poverty. Cash transfers offer temporary relief without altering structural inequality. Unlike universal welfare models in countries such as Brazil or Uruguay, Morocco's programs remain "targeted" and debt-dependent. Health spending stands at around 6.5% of GDP, much of it benefiting private providers. More than half the population relies on private care, while the public health system faces a deficit of over 32,000 professionals. Social protection here functions as an austerity-compatible management tool rather than a redistributive right.

7. Conclusion: Debt, Power, and the Future of Justice

The protests sweeping Morocco are not isolated events but expressions of a deep systemic crisis. Beneath them lies the cumulative impact of four decades of neoliberal policy, a model that treats society as a market and citizens as consumers. Debt has become the backbone of governance, shaping how the state allocates resources and defines legitimacy.

Public goods, education, health, and environment are now treated as investment fields, not social rights. Privatization, once justified as modernization, has exposed its exclusionary reality. The voices rising from the streets demand accountability and a redefinition of development itself.

The question the state can no longer postpone is simple yet fundamental: for whom are public policies managed? For decades, decisions have served those with capital and access, while marginalizing those who bear the cost of austerity. The current unrest signals that this social order is cracking.

Whether the years ahead bring reform or repression will determine Morocco's next chapter. But one truth has already emerged: justice cannot be reduced to financial management or technical reform. It must be rebuilt as a collective right, anchored in equality, dignity, and the fair redistribution of power and resources.

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