

Morocco: the Monarch and Rumours

Salaheddine Lemaizi

In comparison with the majority of Middle East and North African countries, Moroccan political life is a bed of roses. Media coverage of governmental and parliamentary activities appeals little to the general public. The media therefore prefers to focus its attention on the activities of King Mohammed VI and the royal family. Due to its central position in the Moroccan political system, the monarchy generates excitement in the Moroccan media and the general public at large. This very interest has led to it being at the heart of rumours, which in some instances have been reported in the written press. These false stories find fertile ground in a locked political system marked by the absence of political communication on the part of the monarchy,¹ and a lack of professionalism in the media.

The initial rumour

It is 1993, and King Hassan II is preparing for the transition of power to his son, Mohammed VI. Negotiations with the opposition have been held over the previous several years to ensure their participation in what is labelled an 'alternative government.' During this period, a rumour circulates in the salons of Rabat and Casablanca, 'The king is ill,' is whispered in the private meetings of the political and economic class. Khalid Naciri, one of the leaders of the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) offers this take: 'It was an open secret that the king was ill. Indeed in 1993, when receiving the heads of the Koutla,² Hassan said to them, 'I have but a few years left to live, and I wish to spend them with you.'" This information was not made public at the time, nevertheless the news spread in a fairly structured way. However the press were not allowed to publish this news, so the veracity of the rumour was not officially confirmed. Has

this obscurantism been lifted since the arrival of Mohammed VI?

Rumours and celebrity culture in politics

On his accession to the throne in 1999, the young king named Hassan Aourid as spokesman for the Royal Palace. This was a first in the country's history, and a decision that was in keeping with the new reign's policy of openness. This interlude would last only five years, and the spokesman would in fact exercise his functions for only the first two of these years.

The Moroccan and foreign media therefore no longer has an interlocutor at the heart of the palace. The monarchy chooses new ways to communicate. Cleverly orchestrated by communication consultancies,³ Mohammed VI is baptised 'King of the Poor'. Contrary to his father, the monarch opts for proximity to his subjects. In each town he visits, the king informally mingles with the crowds and takes tours in private cars. This method of communication leaves the door open to 'urban legends' about Mohammed VI's character.

The press takes a keen interest in the King's 'celebrity side'. His taste in clothes, food and music are described based on statements by citizens who have supposedly run across him, or from secondary sources, but rarely based on first hand contact. With supporting photographs, the Moroccan press makes its best sales thanks to its 'investigations' on 'M6'.⁴ As Beau and Graciet assert, in the 2000s 'the Arabic newspapers, regurgitating more-or-less verified juicy anecdotes [about the court of Mohammed VI], sold like hot cakes.'⁵ On only one occasion did the palace react to such an article, this was in 2005, when the weekly newspaper Jarida Al Oukhra published a portrait

of the wife of Mohammed VI. This was one of the first to be written about Princess Salma, the king's wife. Here the Royal Family reacted swiftly, and a missive, in a menacing tone, landed on the editorial desk of the newspaper. Freelance journalist Ali Amar reflects on the incident: 'This unprecedented state of fever pitch illustrates the distance the monarchy wishes to maintain with the kingdom's media on the subject of the princess, even if the throne does not hesitate in ostentatiously exposing itself in foreign magazines. Its marketing-savvy approach beyond its borders contrasts with the sacredness of the King for Moroccan subjects who remain infantilised by the law.'⁶ He adds: "The Palace seeks a one-way means of communication."⁷

In the Moroccan political system, the King is by far the predominant actor. No other element in the system carries any weight next to him. This domination has a price, and his private and public lives trigger fantasising. The absence of institutionalised royal public relations obliges the press to throw itself into a game of endless interpretation of the monarch's acts and gestures. Thus the public has become accustomed to reading in the privately-owned press of the alleged 'royal rages' against his close circle; advisors, bodyguards, governors, etc. This 'news' has, however, never been refuted by the Royal Palace. 'Moroccan journalists are very prudent when it comes to the monarchy. If there is a rumour about the institution, it is dealt with cautiously as the monarchy has also been the victim of malicious gossip,' warns Maria Moukrim, a Moroccan investigative journalist. How much credence should be accorded to such 'news'? Is rumour taking precedence over the search for truth?

The King's health and the press trial

On one occasion, a dispatch from *Maghreb Arab Press (MAP)* came as a bombshell to the Moroccan editorial sections. On the August 29, 2009, the official agency announced that 'the sovereign had been placed in convalescence for five days due to an infection posing no threat to his health.' The text, signed by the King's personal doctor, specified the nature of the sickness.

The king 'is infected with rotavirus, causing him digestive troubles and acute dehydration,' stated the press release. This statement from the king's doctor, relayed by the official press agency, proved the impetus for a series of rumours spread by the press. Some of the rumours were already in circulation, but only

in the salons. Prior to this dispatch, there had never been – to my knowledge – articles in the Moroccan press on the King's health.

Maria Moukrim, a journalist at the time for the weekly *al-Ayam*, was following the story, 'The communiqué was an event. The news story was at first a rumour that had been doing the rounds for some time,' she remembers. In order to establish the truth, journalists published false information on the subject. Quoting an unnamed medical source, the daily *al-jarida al-Oula* published an article proposing a noticeably different explanation, stating that 'the origin of the rotavirus contracted by the King is due to his use of corticosteroids against asthma that cause swelling in the body and decreased immunity.' The weekly *al-Michael* then published an article whose headline ran, '*al-Michael* reveals the reasons for the Palace statement on the King's health that caused concern among the general public.' The article quoted a Spanish reporter who had been peddling rumours about the King's health,⁸ and was accompanied by an interview with a doctor entitled: 'Rotavirus is caused by immunodeficiency or allergies.' The weaving of initial reports (blending rumours, hypotheses and secondary sources), coupled with a lack of official sources providing more information to journalists about the king's illness, would have a fatal effect on the written press of the time.

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A few days later, the Attorney General announced the opening of an inquiry into the weekly newspapers *al-Michael* and *al-Ayam*, due to the publication of 'misleading facts and false information,' which followed on from an investigation into the editor and a journalist from the daily newspaper, *al-Jarida al-Oula*.

This judicial marathon would end in the conviction of Driss Chahtane, editor of *Al Michael*, with a one year fixed sentence for 'publishing questionable articles about the health of the king.' Convictions of three month fixed sentences were handed to two other journalists from the weekly newspaper, and a one year suspended sentence to Ali Anouzla, editor of *al-Jarida al-Oula*. Meanwhile, the journalist who had written the incriminating



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article was given a three month suspended sentence. This soap opera would check the spirits of the two sides. The Palace, thinking itself playing fair with a sensitive statement on the health of the monarch thought itself let down by the attitude of certain media outlets that in its opinion were desperate to deal in sensationalism, at any price. The independent media were being sharply told that they could not cross certain 'red lines'. This mishap would be a defining milestone.

Five years later, the episode's effect is still felt. Hence in 2013, when the King's public outing with a crutch did not lead the King's doctor to present a report on the health of the king, the door was opened to the wildest of rumours on the health of Mohammed VI. Today, the confusion persists; rumours circulate on the supposed sickness of the King, supposedly 'evident' from his weight gain, and breathing difficulties during the last years, and can be read about in the foreign press.

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Moukrim, director of the news site Febrayer.com, makes the following observation: 'The problem with rumours concerning the palace is that we have no interlocutor with whom we can communicate. Even if the role of spokesperson exists, we are still not able to get answers to our questions. The Palace has always been a closed institution. This has been a constant since the reign of Hassan II.' For her part, Naciri, a former government spokesperson, defends the policy of the monarchy with regards to public relations: 'The communication strategy of the Royal Palace obeys very precise rules of protocol. Traditionally, the Palace is not an institution open to the four winds. Modernity and democracy can coexist with a system that is not opaque, but still protects the internal life of the monarchic institution.' The aura of mystery surrounding the Moroccan monarchy and the King helps to shape, and perpetuate, the myths about his character and the institution.

Books about the King: revelations and rumours

Unable to interview him,⁹ Moroccan and foreign journalists throw themselves into investigations

to solve the mystery that is 'M6'. Portraits made based on serious investigations may also repeat many rumours. This literature meets with success among the Moroccan public hungry for news about Mohammed VI and his court.

A compendium of conditional sentences and approximations abound, 'Rumour has it that Hassan II has given Basri the task of watching over the heir to the throne,' 'Mohammed VI, seemingly wishing to take a bit more time to take this brutal decision,' 'A persistent rumour insists that an oil slick was discovered and that Mohamed VI ordered the wells be closed, due to their proximity to the Algerian border.'

Whilst Graciet and Baud penned a generally good quality investigation in their 2007 book, even these two experienced journalists do at times yield to rumour, as is evidenced by the following excerpts: 'Mohammed VI and his councillors seem to have preferred to watch their backs.' While referring to the brother of the king, Moulay Rachid: 'A compulsive party animal, whose escapades all Rabat is fantasising about, was supposedly managing with his brother relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia.'¹⁰

A weapon for the 'foreign enemy'

King Mohammed VI has been the subject of many rumours. On several occasions, the origin of such false stories has been the Algerian press. In the climate of tension that prevails between the regimes of the two countries, the press of Morocco's eastern neighbour rarely misses an opportunity to start rumours about the Moroccan Head of State and vice versa.

This was the case in April 2014. On a private trip to the United Arab Emirates, rumours were circulating about the health of the Monarch in the Algerian press. Then two months later, in June, during an official visit to Tunisia, the Algerian press claimed that a misunderstanding had arisen between the Tunisian president and the King. This rumour would force the Tunisian presidency and the Moroccan Royal Cabinet to publish communiqués denying these allegations. Moukrim feels that the Palace's reaction was not fast enough, he states that, 'Rumours travel fast. They must be killed very quickly; otherwise they will grow and spread. In this case, our enemy won his bet.'

Facebook counters rumours

To respond to these rumours, Royal communication has opted over the last months to use social media networks. As such, several unofficial Facebook pages provide Moroccan

internet users with images of the King on his private visits, as was the case in Dubai and Tunisia this year. These banalities of a private nature perform a function of political communication, as they respond to the rumours of the moment. Naciri, a former minister of communication, remains cautious over the meaning to be given to these photos: 'Future events will confirm or otherwise the existence of links between the rumours and these photos. It is certain today that the circulation of these banalities was carried out so as to bring to an end to the moronic campaign against Morocco.' Abdelhamid Jmahri, Editor-in-chief of the daily partisan newspaper *al-Itihad al-Ichtiraki*, states that, 'We must distinguish the public 'body' of the King from the private. One belongs to public life and the other to private life. In the case of the photographs of the King in Tunisia, the Royal Cabinet considered them to be part of his private life.' Moukrim appears critical of this method: 'Communicating by the intermediary of Facebook has advantages and disadvantages. It is a tool that certainly contributes to democratising access to information. However it remains that from a strategic point of view, making Facebook one's backbone indicates a communication problem.'

Rumours and political life

Despite its lack of liveliness, Moroccan political life beyond the Monarchy does not escape the rumour mill either. Here rumour is an instrument in political battles between enemies, both from opposing camps and those of the same sides. Rumours emerge and evolve along with political circumstances. 'One of the first political rumours in Morocco's history was the resignation of the Bekkay government,'¹¹ says Adil Benhamza, leader of the Istiqlal Party.

'Germany won the Football World Cup in Italy in 1990. In the days following the win, the German Embassy, hiding out in the Adaimi Hospital in Jounieh at the time, could not be reached. Rumour had it that the embassy was so proud of the triumph, it would issue 40,000 visas for Lebanese citizens. Later, in August of 1990 embassy employees showed me the video that had been filmed behind a wall of sandbags back then that was showing huge crowds and people waving out of car windows with German flags encircling the embassy, waiting to file their application.'

Achim Vogt, Director Friedrich Ebert Foundation Lebanon

The formation of governments is always the 'high season' for political rumours in Morocco. The press announces some ten times the 'definitive list' of the next government. 'At this juncture in political life, we are into rumour in all its splendour,' comments Khalid Naciri.

For Moukrim, the mechanisms of political rumour in Morocco obey the same rules as elsewhere in the world. 'Rumours can emanate from intelligence services or political actors. They are used like trial balloons or as a means of detracting the attention of the general public,' she says. These reasons force the journalist to analyse rumours from a political standpoint. 'One must understand its context, its means of diffusion, seize its foundations and speculate about its purpose. For me, it is a barometer of political life.'

Across political parties, director of the daily party newspaper and member of the political desk of the USFP, Jmahri, asserts that 'rumours have destroyed lives in the Moroccan political sphere. They are equivalent to political assassination.' He offers as an example the cases of Abderrahim Bouabid¹² and Fathallah Oualalou,¹³ two party leaders who were the victims of rumours. 'The rumours had a precise aim and their timing was no coincidence,' he insists.

Naciri reflects bitterly on his experience of rumours during his time in government: 'A certain number of journalists made a national sport out of it. The rumours had passed beyond the conceivable. We were in a cloud of political and media pollution. In the beginning, I used to react but at the end of my term, disinformation had become so widespread that I no longer paid any attention to the rumours, out of discouragement and by political choice.'

Faced with this flood of rumours, journalists and politicians in Morocco shift the blame

onto one another. The former consider the political actors 'still oblivious to the vital role of communication.' Jmahri, director of Al Itihad states: 'Rumours intensify when institutional communication is absent.' Naciri does not share his opinion: 'The political class have an obligation to communicate. However, an absence of communication can never justify disinformation.' The politicians, for their part, accuse media professionals of 'slipping all too easily into disinformation.' While Moukrim insists that, 'Faced with rumours, journalists have to be careful. They must cross-check information, and take the time to speak to all those concerned. In other words, return to the ABC of journalism.'

Conclusion

An analysis of rumours in the Moroccan political sphere sheds an important light on several aspects of public life. Politically, the monarchy remains disengaged from any meaningful public communication. This is a process that should ideally consist in an ongoing exchange rather than merely one-directional 'communication'. The status of the monarchy and its prior and current experiences reinforce this status quo. The only noticeable change in recent years has been the King's use of new communication channels in order to dispel rumours.

The absence of a structured communication strategy contributes to the propagation of rumours in political circles. Political life in Morocco, as such, offers an open playing field for the use of rumours as a weapon in the service of political competitors.

Finally with the media, journalistic practice is still characterised by breaches of ethics, which allows for rumours to be easily relayed. Despite the Moroccan context where access to information is an uphill battle, journalism must overcome this obstacle in order to carry out its principal mission, to search for verified, corroborated and ordered information - it is the most effective antidote to rumour.

1. For more on this topic, see Mouhtadi Najib, *Pouvoir et communication au Maroc: Monarchie, médias et acteurs politiques (1956-1999)*, L'harmattan (2008).
2. Meaning the 'bloc'. A coalition of four opposition parties: Istiqlal, USFP, PPS and OADP. The first three of these parties would later agree to form a government in 1998.
3. For more information on this subject, read Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste*, La Découverte (2007).
4. Nickname given to King Mohammed by the foreign press in reference to his laid-back approach during the first years of his reign.
5. From *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste*, p.232

6. Ali Amar, Mohammed VI, le grand malentendu. Calmann-Lévy (2009), p. 78
7. Sylvain Moullaird, Maroc: parler de la santé du roi reste tabou, *Libération* (8 September 2009) http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2009/09/08/maroc-parler-de-la-sante-du-roi-reste-tabou_580255
8. For more information on the reporter's version of events, see Ali Amar, Chut ! Le roi Mohamed VI est-il malade? <http://www.demainonline.com/2013/04/05/chut-le-roi-mohamed-vi-est-il-malade/>
9. The last interview given by the King dates back to 2002. Contrary to his father, Mohammed VI does not favour this mode of communication.
10. Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste*, La Découverte (2007), p.206. Translated by Sarah Morris for Perspectives.
11. The government of Bekkay Ben M'barek is the first Moroccan government since independence in 1956.
12. The Socialist leader paid the price for a rumour suggesting that his imprisonment in 1981 had been a deal agreed with Hassan II.
13. A rumour on the homosexual habits of this Socialist leader was published by the Moroccan newspaper *Akhbar al-Ousbouaa* in 2004. Its editor was sentenced to a six months fixed prison term. The author of the article was given a six month suspended sentence.

* Translated from the French by Sarah Morris

The Anthropology of Rumour

Omar Brouksy

'Gossip', 'chit-chat', 'tittle-tattle', 'it is said', 'hearsay'... the terms and expressions that refer to the phenomenon of rumour are in no short supply. Nowadays their multiplicity, the many forms they take and their impact on the daily lives of groups and individuals is widely recognised. However, the scale of rumour's impact remains difficult to grasp, so much so that this phenomenon, ever a hot topic, is at once complex and constantly changing.

How do rumours begin? What forms do they take? What are the methods of amplification that transform a simple rumour into a societal phenomenon with sometimes disastrous, and more often unchecked consequences? What role do truth, cross-checking and verification play in the transmission and exchange of information and data?

All these questions lead us, firstly, to reflect on how rumours begin and on the main characteristics of a phenomenon that continues to intrigue sociologists and anthropologists. We will then examine the methods of amplification of rumour, and the new challenges brought about by the digital revolution, evident most notably in social networks and so-called 'news' sites.

The origins and bases of rumours

Some define rumours as a process of exchanging information whose veracity is not (yet) established. Rumours lie on the fringes of 'facts', but at the heart of social, daily relations between individuals and groups, and can be found in most political, economic and financial structures.

Others describe rumours through their principal characteristics; ephemeral phenomenon, at once fragile and fickle. If their

ephemeral side is often highlighted, rumours nonetheless install themselves by the fact that they are exchanged, relayed and transmitted from one individual to another, and from one group to another. They can also leave their mark by the consequences of their dissemination.

In more concrete terms, the spreading of a rumour entails the seizing of a news story and its appropriation by 'taking it one step further', or by 'adding a layer', before communicating it to an individual, group, or even a media institution.

This process of transmission, through the exaggeration or partial distortion of a piece of unconfirmed news, is not a recent development. As a societal phenomenon par excellence, rumours have always been at the heart of everyday human behaviour, always inspired by preconceived cultural, political and historical notions.

Rumours can piggyback onto short news items, spreading and taking on epic proportions. They can also be born in the wake of a moment of strong emotion in the history of a country, as was the case in 1955 during the return from exile of Sultan Mohammed V, grandfather of the current king of Morocco, Mohammed VI. According to a collective rumour that over time became a national 'legend', Moroccans could spot the face of their Sultan in the moon. This vision would quickly anchor itself into the collective imagination of millions of Moroccans, and offer itself as a tool of cohesion in response to the European coloniser in particular, and all that is in opposition to the aspirations of a nation in general. Rumours are therefore a complex collective construct sandwiched between archaism and modernity, past and present, anxieties and euphoria, moments of doubt and feelings of superiority. As soon as they are born, rumours becomes 'bulimic',



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