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THE MENA REGION AND COVID-19

IMPACT, IMPLICATIONS AND PROSPECTS

Edited by
Zeina Hobaika, Lena-Maria Möller
and Jan Claudius Völkel



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5 Securitisation dynamics and COVID-19 politics in Morocco

Old wine in new bottles?

Giulia Cimini and Beatriz Tomé Alonso¹

5.1 Introduction

Moroccan authorities detected the first cases of COVID-19 at the beginning of March 2020. Soon afterwards, they issued a series of early and restrictive measures to avoid the spread of the pandemic. At first, all events with foreign participants were cancelled, as were public gatherings. Later on, the maritime and land borders were sealed and restrictions on domestic travel were imposed. Mosques, hammams, cafés, schools and universities were ordered to close. On 20 March, a national health state of emergency was declared. After more than three months of strict lockdown, authorities opted for more targeted measures and selective confinements. Partial closures were thus newly imposed, but mainly on major cities such as Tangier and Casablanca over the summer.

While Morocco successfully avoided a major outbreak during the first wave, it nonetheless saw a significant increase in the number of infections after the summer. Although those numbers were not as high as in neighbouring Europe, Morocco emerged as the one of the African countries to have the highest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 (Xinhua, 2020). At the beginning of December 2020, it had recorded 372,620 cases and just over 6,100 deaths since the pandemic started (Hekking, 2020a).

Against this backdrop, this chapter centres around the following question: how did the emergence of an unexpected and non-traditional security threat such as the COVID-19 pandemic impact Morocco's national politics?

Virtually, crises can also be an opportunity for change. With respect to this, this chapter explores to what extent political dynamics have changed in response to the health crisis or simulated a change. Put it differently, whether Moroccans were served 'old wine in new bottles'. Our main argument is that the management of the crisis can be framed as a 'securitisation process' capitalised on by the Palace and providing no exception to the traditional logics of governance in the country. In other words, the monarchy took the lion's share to the detriment of the parliament and government that followed its roadmap and blessed its decisions. In addition, the tendency of Morocco's

politics toward technocratisation was equally confirmed, while securitising the pandemic also allowed for attempts to crack down on rights like freedom of expression, possibly contrasting with mainstream narratives dictated by authorities.

The chapter is organised as follows: first, it will illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of our reflection borrowing from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Next, it will analyse the discursive framing of COVID-19 as a ‘security threat’ to both citizens and the nation by looking at two key traditional royal speeches. It will then illustrate the extent to which the monarchy led in practice in crisis management. Finally, it will highlight how the ‘securitisation’ of the COVID-19 crisis connects with two previous tendencies already present in the Moroccan context, namely, the technocratisation of politics and the limitation of the freedom of speech.

5.2 Securitisation and the COVID-19 pandemic: health, human and national security

By the outset of the twenty-first century, health issues were back on the international agenda as a matter of high politics. Whereas infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria remained endemic – and largely ‘confined’ in terms of their most harmful effects – for many countries in the Global South, a number of potentially lethal viruses responsible for Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) or Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) gave way to a ‘renewed sense of microbial unease’ (Elbe, 2019: 380). As Elbe recalls, health issues have been ‘increasingly articulated in the language of security’ (ibid.) – hence the rising diffusion of the concept of health security – and in connection to the developing ‘human security’ approach revolving around ‘people-centric’ accounts of threats. Health security – defined in relation to diseases and inadequate health care affecting the needs and welfare of ordinary individuals – was thus outlined as a ‘sub-dimension’ or component of human security in the pioneering *Human Development Report* by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (UNDP, 1994). In addition, health security has been increasingly linked to national security, whose potential effects on populations, economies and social stability are amplified by globalisation and international travel.

The COVID-19 outbreak ruthlessly exposed how fragile countries can be in the face of a virus that knows no borders, and it pointed to the multidimensional impact of infectious diseases, which by their very nature lend themselves particularly well to securitisation dynamics.

In the words of the leading scholars of the Copenhagen School, which first laid out the securitisation theory, an issue becomes ‘securitised’ – hence a security issue – inasmuch it ‘is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure’ (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 25–6). Central to this process is the importance of the ‘speech act’, understood as the discursive

representation of certain issues – migration, illicit trafficking and drug abuse being the most glaring examples – as existential threats to the survival of given referent objects. These can be individuals, groups or issues (e.g. national sovereignty or the economy). In doing so, the ‘securitising’ actors are provided the right and legitimacy to use exceptional measures. This process, however, is far from being automatic. In other words, ‘only once an actor has convinced an audience of its legitimate need to go beyond otherwise binding rules and regulations (emergency mode) can we identify a case of securitization’ (Taureck, 2006: 55). Remarkably, these moves do not occur in a vacuum. The securitisation processes are influenced and modulated by power relations in a given context. In turn, they ‘have an impact on power relations among securitizing actors and the relevant audiences to whom they address their securitizing moves’ (Balzacq, Léonard and Ruzicka, 2016: 501). The social context is also relevant since it is the ‘field of power struggles’ where securitising actors attempt to swing the audience’s support toward a specific policy or course of action (Balzacq, 2005: 173).

In our particular case, we suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has been securitised by Moroccan state authorities, and by the Palace in particular, and framed as a threat to both citizens and the nation. To a certain extent, the securitisation of the pandemic is even more evident exactly because Morocco was not struck with the same virulence as many other European, Asian or American countries. By no means does this underestimate the detrimental effects on the Maghrebi kingdom – particularly concerning the economy – but we contend that securitising the pandemic has been instrumental in consolidating traditional power dynamics in the short term, and the related tendency toward technocratisation. It was therefore a missed opportunity for other institutional actors to recover their legitimacy and claim a greater role in the domestic political arena.

5.3 The securitisation of the pandemic: the Palace’s central role through discourse and political practice

Since the very beginning of the pandemic, the Palace has been distinguished for being the most proactive stakeholder – unsurprisingly, to certain extents. The 2011 constitution meaningfully, albeit only partly, reassessed the balance of power among state offices and institutions. One of the most significant changes, for example, concerned the extended functions and powers of the head of the government (Abouzzohour and Tomé Alonso, 2019: 451). According to Article 47, in fact, he must be named from within the party receiving the most votes in the election, and no longer at the king’s will. This remarkable shift should have been accompanied by a *de facto* new legitimacy and relevance for the prime minister (PM), that is not always the case. In fact, amongst persisting constitutional and unwritten constraints, personalities more than institutional prerogatives seem to be able to make the difference, as evidenced by the more charismatic leadership of former PM Abdelilah

Benkirane in comparison to his successor, Saadeddine El-Othmani, both issued from the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (Parti de la Justice et du Développement, PJD). The constitution still recognises the very broad powers and responsibilities of the king, which is the reason why Morocco is often referred to as an ‘executive’ monarchy (Szmolka, 2021). Suffice it to say that the king, even before being labelled the ‘head of state’, is the ‘commander of the faithful’, the most powerful religious authority of the country. By virtue of this title, he rules by royal decrees (*dahirs*) without being subject to the principle of accountability or responsibility. The king’s role in national politics is of primary relevance. This is particularly evident if one considers that his annual speeches before parliament dictate the political agenda, along with the fact that he presides over the council of ministers, which is responsible for state orientations, among other things. Last but not least, the monarchy’s influence on the executive branch is always assured by the presence of technocratic figures within the cabinet and by the choice of the ‘ministries of sovereignty’.

Beyond constitutional prerogatives, the centrality of the monarchy is more entrenched with a ‘traditional’ understanding of power in a Weberian sense, that is a power legitimised by long-standing customs and practices. In this, the monarchy’s authority is deeply rooted in the Moroccan way of governance and defines a kind of informal ‘hierarchy’ in the decision-making process. A distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ elites can thus be traced: among the former are King Mohammed VI and his small circle of confidants, whilst the latter include political parties and parliamentary leaders (Feliu and Parejo Fernández, 2009: 108–12). With regard to this, the pandemic has further highlighted the imbalance of power and resources in favour of primary elites.

As mentioned above, the ‘securitisation’ approach is inextricably linked to ‘speech acts’, the vehicles through which a previously non-politicised issue comes to the forefront of public debate as an existential threat that needs to be dealt with using exceptional measures. Crisis management thus goes through the discursive construction of the threat and the responses to it. The ways in which both are framed and addressed deserve further attention.

Traditionally, the king addresses a speech to the nation on two main occasions: the Throne Commemoration on 29 July and the Anniversary of the Revolution of the King and the People on 20 August. Less than a month apart, these two speeches were substantially different in 2020, the former being imbued with optimism and pride, and the latter with sombre tones and pessimism. This shifting approach may be in part due to the upsurge of cases over the summer with the most restrictive measures being relaxed. In both cases, three core clusters emerge – what we may define as a tripartite structure – in which two are recurrent themes. The triad ‘claiming – giving thanks – calling for’ in the discourse of the first speech stands in contrast to the triad ‘claiming – blaming – calling for’ in the discourse of the second.

In July 2020, the king claimed the need for strict measures serving a dual priority: protecting the citizens and the highest interest of the nation (Kingdom of Morocco, 2020a). He praised their effectiveness whilst also acknowledging the harsh impact they had on weaker sections of the population. After that, he proudly acknowledged the ‘awareness, discipline and positive responsiveness’ of Moroccans and the nation coming hand in hand with solidarity and patriotism. Lastly, he called for national unity to realise social justice all across the country, and to develop a more inclusive model of development – also in light of the criticalities highlighted by the pandemic, such as the dependence of certain sectors on external hazards, the size of the informal sector and the weakness of social protection networks.

The speech in August was in a completely different vein. As elsewhere, war-related terminology has been the mainstream discursive framework of the pandemic. In this royal speech, references to past hardships and sacrifices were combined with mentions of the current ‘fight’ and the ‘unfinished battle’ that characterises these ‘difficult, unprecedented times for everyone’ (Kingdom of Morocco, 2020b). The king’s heavy and pessimistic tone – a novelty in itself – further highlighted the gravity of the circumstances. The king claimed the genuineness of the measures taken and praised their effectiveness, as evidenced by the low number of deaths and infection in comparison to many other countries. However, he quickly transferred the responsibility for the increased number of cases after the lockdown was lifted on to those who deny the existence of the pandemic or believe it has passed, those who do not respect the prescriptions of public authorities or who do not take appropriate hygiene measures. This unspecified ‘significant fringe of the population’ was blamed head-on for its ‘inadmissible relaxation’. Lastly, he called to patriotism, equating it with individual responsibility to take care of the well-being and safety of the collective. Against the backdrop of a nation portrayed as cohesive, patriotic and in solidarity, where the monarchy and the people act in concert, the rule-breakers are consequently depicted as running against the core values of the nation.

By defining the extent of the emergency and framing it, the king acted as the key securitising player. In so doing, he not only defined the boundaries of discourse and the trajectories of action, but also emerged as an actor capable of assuming the leadership in difficult times. He did this without resorting to a typical paternalistic tone.

Two interesting aspects emerge from these royal discourses: firstly, the transfer of responsibility away from the authorities to the citizenry, or at least part of it, according to a rhetoric approach that is by no means exclusive to Morocco. Indeed, regime type does not seem to be the crucial variable in this sense, as this has been a practice largely observed internationally. In this chapter we are arguing that the crisis triggered by the pandemic has confirmed the centrality of the Palace: remarkably, this statement holds true except for its liability for any deficiencies or failures. This is not new, either. Notably, political parties are the main traditional scapegoats of the country’s missed

development objectives, and they are perceived as such by the citizenry at large. On this occasion, irresponsible citizens were blamed and held accountable for a possible recrudescence of the pandemic. It is worth noting that, by virtue of these discourses, the king reiterated a ‘direct’ communication with his ‘dear people’, thus bypassing any intermediaries, and highlighted the relevance of the unity between the crown and the people, which is a unity of purpose as well.

Secondly, in sync with the securitisation process, this rhetoric leaves no room for questioning either the current choices or those in the past that have led to the present crisis (Laaroussi, 2020). For example, almost no debate was held on the neoliberal economic model that led to the systematic dismantlement of the public health care system, which is highly penalised in comparison to the private sector and accessible only to a small segment of the population, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities (Cimini and Mansouri, 2020).

In this sense, the Moroccan government has completely endorsed the king’s ‘securitisation’ speech and has also itself become a ‘securitising’ actor. In the parliament, current PM Saadeddine El-Othmani referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis ‘without precedents’ which

requires from the government and from all national forces – parliament, trade unions and professional organisations, the media and intellectuals, civil society and citizens – a high level of patriotism and commitment, solidarity and mutual aid, as well as innovation, to overcome this virus and face its repercussions.

(Moroccan Parliament, 2020)²

Not only discursively, but also in practice, the Palace took the lead. Our next section will explore this dimension.

5.4 Leading the crisis: measures and domains of intervention

To better appreciate who securitised the COVID-19 and how, it is useful to recall here what impact the virus had in the country. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Morocco’s gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to shrink by 7% by the end of the year (IMF, 2020). The National Tourist Confederation estimates that tourism-related revenues decreased by 92% in the first three quarters of 2020 (CNT, 2020). In particular, the informal economy, precarious workers, women and migrants suffered the most during the lockdown measures and saw their social and economic rights reduced (Zaireg, 2020).

This deterioration in the economic situation and the increasing uncertainties regarding the future come at a difficult time for Morocco. In 2019, King Mohammed VI indirectly acknowledged the failure of the development model which has been the centrepiece of the strategy to fight poverty since the 2005 launch of the National Human Development Initiative (Desrues,

2007; Tomé-Alonso and García de Paredes, 2020). Indeed, a 2019 Oxfam report ranks Morocco as the most unequal country in North Africa (Oxfam, 2019). As Desrues and García de Paredes (2019) point out, these inequalities affect rural areas and young people most of all. A recent UNDP *Human Development Report* also highlights the fact that ‘inequality stagnated in Morocco’ (UNDP, 2019: 118), whilst its progress in the Human Development Index went from an average annual growth of 1.53% to 1.14%.

The COVID-19 crisis has also exposed ‘educational inequalities’ and ‘enduring fragilities’, such as the digital divide, the school system’s inability to quickly switch to online platforms and the difficulty of poor families in densely populated households (Chalfaouat and Cimini, 2020; see also Chapter 10 by El Hage and Yehya in this volume).

Even more remarkably, it was immediately evident that the fragility of public health care and its incapacity to absorb the shock led to a much greater outbreak of cases. After all, since 2019 public sector doctors and medical students have been denouncing substandard infrastructure, unfair ‘competition’ with the private sector and the uneven distribution of facilities and personnel across regions and between urban and rural areas, among other problems (Cimini and Chalfaouat, 2020).

It is therefore plausible to think that Morocco focused on a prevention strategy through early restrictive measures being well aware of the poor capacity of its public health sector. At the same time, remarkable financial resources were injected into the system to the extent that some describe these efforts as the ‘Moroccan Marshall Plan’ (Laaroussi, 2020).

Along with restrictive corrective measures such as the lockdown, the mandatory closure of establishments or travel bans, Moroccan authorities have indeed been proactive in taking health- and economic-related measures quickly. When tracing back the decisions taken along their chain of command, it becomes evident that the Palace is at the heart of the decision-making process. Most of the initiatives were spearheaded by it, and the leading figures or forces all gravitated around it. As early as March 2020, the king designed the roadmap to face the crisis. He launched a special fund ‘to cover the costs of upgrading the medical system, support the national economy to cope with the shocks induced by this pandemic’ (MAP, 2020c). Under the king’s input, many corporations and businessmen contributed to this fund with donations, also encouraged by the promise of tax relief (Morocco World News, 2020). In his speeches, the king proudly claimed his role in mobilising the aid needed for the population. Informal workers also receive 80–1,200 Moroccan dirhams (€7–110) per month based on the size of their household (OECD, 2020: 3). In the first weeks of the pandemic, Morocco doubled the available intensive care beds from 1,640 to 3,000 units (Hatim, 2020). Moreover, upon the instructions of Mohammed VI – the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces – the Royal Armed Forces (Forces Armées Royales) quickly took action and deployed, for example, a military hospital in Benslimane in the Casablanca-Settat region, which was one of the most affected ones (MAP,

2020a). In fact, the king ordered the mobilisation of military medical infrastructure and personnel as further support in facing COVID-19 (Hekking, 2020b). The armed forces, then, played a key role in the management of the pandemic, not only in relation to health care facilities but also to ensure that the measures imposed by the authorities were complied with.

Not only does the deployment of the army emphasise the royal leadership, but it also has a positive impact on an already much-trusted institution. As a 'rule', Moroccan institutions hardly win their citizens' trust, with few exceptions. With the necessary caution that every survey brings with it, the Moroccan 'Trust in Institutions' Index points out very high levels of confidence for both the army and the police: 83.3% and 78%, respectively. By contrast, representative and elective institutions score much lower: only 22.6% trust political parties and 32.7% trust the parliament (MIPA, 2019).

With great media visibility, additional initiatives included the royal-sponsored campaign of testing in the private sector, as well as the royal amnesty granted to more than 5,000 prisoners for humanitarian reasons, but with no benefit for the most troubled and politicised cases, such as the prisoners from the Rif social movement. With a strong emotional impact, Mohammed VI also ordered the repatriation of thousands of Moroccan citizens who had been stranded abroad since the earlier border closures after months of waiting and uncertainty. Finally, and in line with his pivot to Africa and commitment to cooperation among countries in the Global South or South-South cooperation, the king boosted the country's role internationally by allocating aid to African countries.

Indeed, the centrality of the monarchy is not only produced in the domestic space, but also in the international arena, traditionally considered the 'reserved domain' of Mohammed VI (Hernando de Larramendi and Fernández Molina, 2014). In the context of the pandemic, Mohammed VI reaffirmed his 'African vocation' – which began after Morocco's return to the African Union (AU) in 2017 (Hernando de Larramendi and Tomé Alonso, 2017) – by ordering the shipment of medical supplies to African countries (MAP, 2020b). One relevant aspect of this cooperation is that the materials which have been sent are completely manufactured in Morocco, 'which is interpreted as a message to all the countries of the continent: we must count on our own forces; Africa must mobilize its own resources against the pandemic and its dire consequences' (Canales, 2020). Thus, Morocco wants to emerge as a leading actor in cooperation as well as in trade exchanges, deploying its soft power and becoming a resource hub in the African continent. The king's proposal to create a Joint African Operation structure can also be understood in this sense (Medias24, 2020b).

Moreover, Morocco has confirmed its increasing interest in establishing new partnerships with non-traditional allies like China (Abouzzohour and Tomé Alonso, 2019). In this sense, the expected vaccination campaign is also an opportunity to develop closer links with China. As stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'the two cooperation agreements related to anti-COVID-19

vaccine clinical trials', which were signed between Rabat and Beijing, 'come to consolidate and flesh out the dynamic of cooperation between Morocco and China, with a new and promising dimension of cooperation' (MAEC, 2020).

In sum, and despite the challenges faced during the COVID-19 crisis and the foreseeable economic and social consequences, Morocco has sought to strengthen its image at international level. In this sense, some European political figures and media outlets have praised the management of the pandemic, specifically the drastic response from the regime and its ability to quickly adapt production to face the new needs to the extent that it can be considered as a model to follow. For example, French leftist member of parliament Jean-Luc Mélenchon stated that 'Morocco has performed well in its plan to combat COVID-19 by commandeering its textile industry to make protective masks. France should be inspired by it' (Laaroussi, 2020).

5.5 Old wine: the impetus of technocratisation and a legalist, punitive approach

The aforementioned securitisation process takes place in a broader, particular context of power relations and dynamics. Two trends in particular seem to be confirmed in 2020 during the pandemic: on the one hand, the technocratisation of politics, already boosted since the arrival of Mohammed VI to the throne, and the parallel 'retreat' of the more purely political actors.

On the other hand, freedom of expression and freedom of the press have never ceased to be questioned, even long before the pandemic.

Hence, citizens have been called to adhere to top-down orders and to close their ranks around 'those who know'. During the first and second waves of the pandemic, 'technical knowledge' remained unquestioned. Beyond widespread calls for the security of society, a broader debate on the political actors charged with providing security has largely been absent, as has a deeper reflection on the meanings and referent objects of security (Laaroussi, 2020). Without disregarding the relevance of specific expertise, it is nonetheless worth observing that 'technocracy' and 'technocratic figures' are traditionally double-edged swords in Morocco.

More specifically, they have been the instruments used by the monarchy for interference and control over national politics and public affairs. The idea of authority in the country thus combines the rise of technocratic elites and an executive monarchy that 'governs and controls the limit of what is politically permissible' (Ojeda García and Suárez Collado, 2015: 51). Public management is then depoliticised and de-democratised (Brown, 2015: 18) and the figure of the monarch appears reinforced compared to that of other actors in the Moroccan political space. It is no coincidence that, starting from the coordination meeting held in Casablanca in March 2020 under the king's auspices which produced the roadmap for action against the pandemic, those appearing in the front line next to Mohammed VI were not

only his ‘royal’ ministers (for example, the Minister of the Interior) but also technocrats. Notably, Mohamed El Youbi, the director of epidemiology at the Ministry of Health, completely overshadowed the minister himself, Khalid Aït Taleb.

By moving away from the other Moroccan institutions and reinforcing the logic of the executive monarchy, technocratisation runs in the direction of consolidating citizens’ distrust in elected institutions. The parliament and the political parties have once again relegated themselves to a marginal position, renouncing their role as ‘the link between society and political decision-makers’ (Maghraoui, 2019: 18). Like the parliament, they have simply echoed the king’s words and blessed the decisions taken. In a follow-up to the measures undertaken against the pandemic, and in line with the overall securitisation framework, PM Saadeddine El-Othmani stated:

For its part, the government is mobilised, under the enlightened leadership of HM King Mohammed VI, may God preserve him, to assume its full responsibility, as a united team, and to undertake whatever the situation requires in terms of actions and decisions, in an energetic and orderly manner. [...] These measures, which were able to distinguish our country and allow it to be at the level of the requirements of this conjuncture, were taken in accordance with the Directives of HM King Mohammed VI [...] and under his direct supervision [...]. His Majesty had thus given his High instructions in order to take all the necessary measures to bring our country to safety, including the organisation of the operation for the return of Moroccans from the Chinese city of Wuhan.

(Moroccan Parliament, 2020; own omissions)

In doing so, from the very beginning, Othmani validated the leadership role of the monarchy while exposing the government’s role of implementing royal decisions. At least implicitly, he corroborates the current balance of power and the marginalisation of elected institutions in the decision-making process. By calling for ‘national unity’, it is difficult for political parties – even within the government coalition – to propose debates or alternative policies. Indeed, a division between leadership and management responsibility is established.

As for the second trend mentioned before, it is important to observe that securitisation dynamics also play out when the identified threat becomes an all-encompassing category in the name of which a number of rights are restricted. Freedom of expression is a case in point.

In 2019, Reporters Without Borders warned about the judicial harassment suffered by journalists in Morocco (Reporters Without Borders, 2019) when it was obvious that social networks were being used for political criticism (Tomé Alonso and García de Paredes, 2020). Social networks were thus the targets of the controversial draft law number 22.20, which attempted to criminalise false

information on the internet ('fake news'; see also Chapter 4 by Richter et al. in this volume). Presented to the government council by the Ministry of Justice in late March 2020, the draft law provided a basis for prison sentences and high fines (Medias24, 2020a). Indeed, some people had already been arrested for 'false rumours' (BBC, 2020). International human rights institutions and civil society organisations have been particularly critical of the draft law and expressed their concern about the vagueness of notions such as 'threatening public order, security and the Monarchy's constants'. These charges have been considered as pretexts 'to censor relevant information uncomfortable for the government or use the COVID-19 crisis as a pretext to silence the voices of dissent' (Kacha, 2020).

In addition to the socio-economic measures listed before, Moroccan authorities have taken some punitive measures. Remarkably, during the first month after the state of medical emergency was declared, 2,593 people were prosecuted for disrespecting the health-related restrictions (Medias24, 2020c). Among the arrests, one of the most notorious and debated was that of the Salafist Abou Naim, who was sentenced to one year in prison and a pecuniary sanction after uploading a video criticising the decision of the High Council of Ulemas to close Moroccan mosques to fight the spread of COVID-19 (Sefrioui, 2020). Likewise, the pandemic did not stop arbitrary arrests of outspoken journalists and activists on charges that seem backed by scant evidence but which are punctually linked to sexual or espionage offences (Cimini and Mansouri, 2020).

5.6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis in Morocco has undergone a clear securitisation process. The king Mohammed VI has not only confirmed himself to be the key securitising actor, but has also strengthened his authority. By centralising all the major initiatives to curb the pandemic and address its socio-economic consequences without losing direct contact with 'his dear people' (not only through his speeches, but also through official media) and by boosting diplomatic international activities traditionally in his domain, the monarch has emerged as the key actor and the only one capable of leading the country through this delicate and uncertain period.

Under the 'instructions of the king' (following the formula used by media outlets), restrictive measures as well as health- and economic-related ones have been taken. These measures have not aroused remarkable resistance from any political parties, organisations or social movements, nor have they called into question the structural, dysfunctional allocation of resources to the public health sector and domestic power balance.

For its part, both the government and the 'opposition' have been marginalised in the decision-making process. At the same time, they have not claimed a major role, self-limiting themselves to follow the decisions of the Palace. Interestingly, the centrality of the latter – even in these exceptional

circumstances – holds true except for its liability for any shortcomings or failures to manage the pandemic that, in this context, fall on irresponsible citizens.

Lastly, the process of securitisation has not only confirmed an enduring trend of technocratisation but has also favoured a clampdown on the restrictions of freedom of expression as the thwarted attempt of draft law against fake news and arbitrary arrests shows.

In conclusion, rather than old wine in new bottles, we could say that the ‘bottles’ – understood here as dynamics and actors at stake – are also the same. In this, the exceptionality of the pandemic was not taken as an input or trigger to alter the status quo, but rather as a tool to further consolidate it.

Notes

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- 2 Here, as in the case of other non-English biographical references, the translation is by the authors.

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