

# Moroccan Millennials and the Quiet Cultural Revolution

by [Mohamed Chtatou \(/experts/mohamed-chtatou\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mohamed Chtatou \(/experts/mohamed-chtatou\)](#)

Dr. Mohamed Chtatou is a political analyst and professor of education science at the University of Rabat. Chtatou is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



## Brief Analysis

**P**olitical observers are struggling to measure the full impacts of the internet on political change—an issue that initially came to the attention of the Arab world during the Arab Spring. The digital revolution has brought the dream of democracy and personal freedom to the Arab world, but it is also shifting major features of Arab culture, in spite of the strong tug of tradition and religion.

Millennials are the first generation to grow up with the “digital revolution,” an online arena for political activism and ability to spread the ideals of globalization and freedom. Social media in particular has the ability to challenge previously entrenched norms: Arabs have taken note of the movement of American millennials expressing solidarity with Palestinians against Israeli onslaught on Gaza, a move unheard of in the annals of American politics. In the Arab World, millennials successfully challenged dictatorships during the Arab Spring, despite the political backlash and co-opting of this movement by establishment figures—namely Islamist parties. However, the cultural shifts that social media have engendered are both less recognized and more lasting.

Unlike the Arab Spring, on which Western observers have produced hundreds of books, articles, and documentaries, there is little attention being paid to the quieter cultural revolution that the internet has engendered. In fact, this cultural revolution is thriving because of its ability to remain relatively unnoticed both by outside observers and establishment figures—at least for the time being.

Morocco is a particularly important case of this phenomenon. Unlike many Middle Eastern countries, the government has refrained from placing filters on internet usage. Moroccan millennials access the internet through PCs, smart phones (often with 4G connections), and tablets. Most public places, including cafes and restaurants, now providing free Wi-Fi in response to a massive demand. The city of El Jadida is even offering free internet services within the municipality limits. The strong online connections between the Moroccan Diaspora community in France with those who remain in the country have particularly driven a shift in norms and expectations within Morocco. Moroccan youth are eager to apply the French liberal and democratic system to their own country in order to benefit from the same privileges this Western democracy allows its Moroccan expatriates and offspring of migrants. Personal freedom, social justice, equal opportunity, and political representation and accountability—in other words,

full democracy—all appear temptingly accessible online.

### **Challenging the Political Establishment**

State media has always served the interests of the political and religious establishments, obsequiously glorifying the conservative monarchy and chanting the praise of a traditional and austere Islam that refuses to adapt to the realities of modern times. Sick of the fact that this media hardly ever touches on subjects relevant to them, the youth (almost 40 percent of Morocco's total population) is creating a parallel world online that refuses to comply with the extant social and political rules of Moroccan society.

The 2011 constitution, as in all previous constitutional documents, clearly states that the person of the king is to be respected and is above any form of criticism. As such, all political parties, either from the left or right, adhere to this law and limit criticism to government institutions such as parliament, understood as an indirect and polite way of questioning governance decisions made by the king.

Here, millennials point out that the monarchical establishment is reneging on its promise of incremental democracy and incremental devolution of power from 2011. Youth continue to adhere to the monarchy as a symbol of stability due to its historical and religious legitimacy, yet millennials are also willing to more openly criticize the self-perpetuating interests, corruption, and nepotism of Morocco's political parties.

Youth also openly reject the traditional relationship between state and society known as *Makhzen* as obsolete. As such, they reject the *bay'a*—the traditional expression of allegiance that takes place on the second day of the Throne Day in July, whereby thousands of state employees, elites, and local and national representatives dressed in white *djellabas* bow to the king on his horse. This ritual dates to the initial establishment of a monarchy in Morocco thirteen centuries prior, yet in the eyes of the youth this tradition also entrenches the concept of subject rather than citizen. They expect their relationship to the state to include both obligations and rights, rather than an exclusive commitment to the former.

This suspicion of traditions seen as overly subservient also reflects a skepticism of the respect for seniority traditionally embedded in Moroccan culture. Younger Moroccans are taught to keep silent and listen to the elders who have more experience. However, online discourse is dominated by the millennial voice, and the opinions aired therein present a quite different style of political discourse.

### **Challenging the Social Establishment**

Since the adoption of a new family code in Morocco known as *Moudawana* in 2004, Moroccan women enjoy greater freedoms than in the past. They are able to be married without the permission of a family guardian, refuse polygamy for their husbands, and have more equal access to inheritance.

Yet the ability to connect with others through the internet outside of the traditional confines of gendered space has also led to millennials pushing the still strong boundaries of religiously inspired sexual taboos offline as well. Men and women are now openly dating partners inside and outside the country, marrying non-Muslims, and entering into relationships otherwise classified as *haram*. For example, while it is permitted for Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women, the reverse is religiously prohibited unless the man were to convert. Yet younger Moroccan women are nevertheless ignoring this proscription.

And while gay culture was always tolerated by Moroccan society so long as it was kept secret, gay and lesbian Moroccans are coming out of the closet and openly displaying their sexual identity online without the same level of fear of retribution thanks to the digital revolution. Moroccans are even writing openly about their sexual identities, such as the Moroccan-French writer Abdellah Taia, who published a book on his sexual orientation.

Yet the internet has ultimately allowed for increased sexual exploitation as well. Many Moroccan women are seeking

work in the Gulf States as sex workers through the internet, with reports of fathers and families encouraging their daughters to migrate to the Gulf countries to make money as prostitutes. Moreover, this cycle has also driven men from the Gulf to participate in sexual tourism in such cities as Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh, and Agadir.

Moreover, the older population has begun pushing back against these shifting norms. In 2013, two youths from the conservative northern city of Nador publicly kissed after leaving school, and the video of their embrace spread on YouTube. [Reactions \(https://www.leconomiste.com/article/911686-le-baiser-qui-m-ne-en-prison\)](https://www.leconomiste.com/article/911686-le-baiser-qui-m-ne-en-prison) were mixed: some applauded the act and asked for the strengthening of personal freedom, while certain religious figures asked the state to punish the kids, who had supposedly been trapped by the subliminal influence of the western media.

While the state did in fact arrest the couple, this act triggered a worldwide [campaign \(https://www.france24.com/fr/20131207-maroc-baiser-nador-trois-adolescents-photo-facebook-justice-kiss-in\)](https://www.france24.com/fr/20131207-maroc-baiser-nador-trois-adolescents-photo-facebook-justice-kiss-in) for their release and prompted a “kiss-in” in front of the parliament in Rabat, in defiance of religious conservatism. Under this pressure, the government released the youths and dropped charges.

### **Building an Alternate Cultural Narrative**

Since the revival of the Amazigh nationalism in North Africa, Amazigh activists in Morocco have advocated a historical narrative counter to the prevalent view of early Moroccan history. They argue that Arab armies conquered North Africa by the sword in the 7th century and not by the act of peaceful conversion of the population to Islam known as futuHat.

This narrative that deeply challenges the broader Arab understanding of certain major aspects of Moroccan identity. In particular, the nationalists view the Islamic presence in the area as the worst form of colonialism experienced by the Amazigh people of this region. The internet aided in the call for Tamazight to become an official language, which became officially enshrined in the 2011 constitution. However, their most abrasive move is to call for friendship with Israel by setting up Israeli-Amazigh associations, arguing that there are many Jewish Amazigh individuals who have made a notable contribution to the culture and that Israel, like the Amazigh, are victims of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism. For many Moroccan Arab nationalists, these arguments border on traitorous to Morocco and Islam and warrant arrest. Yet the internet allows for the dissemination of these counter-cultural views, and a new generation of Amazigh nationalists is developing this increasingly coherent counter-narrative through online forums and social media.

The shock of the Arab Spring’s apparent failure has left many blind to the more incremental changes that the internet has brought about in Moroccan society. What remains to be seen is the response of establishment figures—particularly those religious figures who may either adapt the teachings of Islam to the new social norms of millennials or double down on demands for state-controlled social conservatism. Regardless of the political outlook of Morocco and the greater Arab world, the cultural revolution is here. Moroccan millennials want to create a future of their own liking that responds to their needs rather than the imposed expectations of a religion or a culture. With the internet, these millennials have found a platform to express these needs, and will in all likelihood continue to shape the real world around them. ❖

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