

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



Global Information Society Watch

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MOROCCO

THE INTERNET AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP



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Introduction

Corruption has been one of the most prominent factors hindering economic development in the Arab world. Morocco has a long history of a lack of accountability and transparency of public services and administration vital in guaranteeing the citizen's right to have access to information and services without restrictions or lengthy bureaucratic procedures. The kingdom still ranks high on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.¹ Morocco is 80th out of 183 countries evaluated and the 10th most corrupt country out of the 18 Arab states. In 2011, 4,415 corruption court cases were filed around the country.²

The ranking of Morocco vis-à-vis corruption reflects the extent to which this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the country's ecosystem. The current status of corruption should ring an alarm for the authorities to prioritise addressing it in order to guarantee an accountable and transparent public sector, the prime investor in the country and the least trusted.

The reality of matters is that the recently elected government, in what are known as the most democratic and transparent elections following the Arab Spring, has chosen to bury its head in the sand about the issue. The main slogan of the electoral campaign of the Islamist party currently in power, Hizb Al-Adala Wa At-tanmia (Justice and Development), was the extinction of corruption in Morocco if they won the elections. However, a controversial answer by the elected head of the party and current Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane about the government policy against corruption during a recent interview with Al-Jazeera left the media and civil society baffled and outraged. He quoted a verse from the Quran that "God forgives what occurred in the past, and if anyone backslides, God will take revenge from him."³ The explana-

tions he provided did not appeal to the Moroccan audience; he sounded defeated and helpless with no concrete plans to eradicate corruption.

Citizen media websites and social media channels exploded with harsh criticism towards the prime minister's "strategy" and demanded that the head of the government should work on setting up a transparent and reliable legal mechanism to bring corrupt individuals to justice.

Anti-corruption legislative context

Morocco ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption in 2007 and established the Central Authority for the Prevention of Corruption in 2008, whose efficiency is limited since it is not entitled to investigate and prosecute corruption cases.⁴

The agency launched a website to stop corruption in 2009,⁵ and it is exclusively dedicated to corruption incidents related to public tenders and investment operations pertinent to small and medium-sized enterprises. However, only 600 corruption incidents were reported during the first year after it was launched⁶ – small enterprises generally refrain from denouncing corruption and are sceptical about the effectiveness of such mechanisms. A recent study on public tenders transparency conducted by the Moroccan Competition Council, which reports to the prime minister, concluded that 63% of the enterprises confirmed corruption still reigns in approving public tenders, while 44% of enterprises stated that it is still extremely difficult to access information about public tenders and they usually have to rely on their professional network to get the information needed.⁷

The National Agency for the Promotion of Small and Medium Enterprises, the Central Authority for the Prevention of Corruption and the General Confederation of Businesses⁸ lobbied the government to implement laws to inject more transparency in

1 cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/

2 hespress.com/societe/50570.html

3 www.morocccoworldnews.com/2012/08/50595/the-unbelievable-irresponsibility-of-mr-benkirane

4 www.transparency.org/whatwedo/pub/national_integrity_system_study_overview_morocco_2009

5 www.stopcorruption.ma

6 www.stopcorruption.ma/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78%3Aqla-corruption-est-bien-installee-au-marocq-&catid=37%3Aarticles-de-presse&lang

7 almassae.ma/node/49864

8 www.econostrum.info/La-corruption-est-bien-installee-au-Maroc-a7273.html

the Moroccan judiciary system and win the trust of foreign investors. In a recent survey carried out by Transparency International, 31% of the businesses interviewed confirmed that in the last 12 months their company had failed to win a contract or gain new business in the country because a competitor paid a bribe.⁹

In order to reinforce the legal mechanism to combat corruption, a declaration of assets law was approved in 2008 along with a law on the protection of whistleblowers. Yet the country has no law regulating conflict of interests between a minister's official functions and private activities. Ministers and parliamentarians are obliged to declare their assets, but declarations are not publicly available.¹⁰

Corruption in Morocco does not only affect foreign investments and the business sector; the normal citizen also suffers from the lack of transparency and accountability of the public administration which makes it difficult to have access to services that are an inherent right. Corruption extends throughout various sectors and levels, including the judicial system, police, land administration, licences, infrastructure and public utilities (education and health), and customs.

Sometimes the only way for a normal person to get served is to pay a bribe. Bribery is negatively perceived in the society, but it is widely accepted as in some cases it is the only resort to prevent hassle or to save time seeking a governmental service. People have no faith in the judicial system, so reporting bribes is not a common practice since incidents of corruption are widespread and the authorities are not able to absorb the problem.

Corruption, the internet and social media in Morocco

The widespread use of the internet in Morocco – and specifically social media and citizen media – have slightly changed people's perceptions about reporting bribery cases. It all started back in 2007 when an unidentified person called "Targuist Sniper" posted four amateur videos on YouTube¹¹ showing gendarmes stopping car after car to extract bribes. This incident triggered a new trend in society: it inspired other people to follow the same steps to denounce illegal practices of the police using the same method.

The outcome of the videos posted by the people has led to several arrests amongst the gendarmes

involved in bribery. It seems to be an effective way to prosecute any official caught red handed in the act of accepting bribes. It is now very common to read about "Targuist"-style arrests, yet the public is still concerned about the bribes that occur amongst higher-level officials and cannot be tracked and accounted for.

Many Facebook groups¹² have emerged to denounce corruption practices in Morocco.¹³ People have started taking initiatives to raise awareness about the phenomenon and its impact on the local economy from a citizen perspective. There are no signs that the government is taking these efforts into account; however, civil society is pushing forward by taking the lead role in mobilising the public to report on bribery cases using online tools. Transparency Morocco has recently launched a training programme for bloggers and social media enthusiasts at the local level¹⁴ who are interested in contributing in its mission to eradicate corrupt practices in the Moroccan administrative system.

Transparency Morocco is also championing an online website with a group of activists dedicated to mapping bribery in Morocco. Since it was established in January 2012, "Mamdawrinch",¹⁵ which means "we will not bribe" in Moroccan dialect, has received 109 bribery reports.¹⁶ The website also specifies the total amount of the bribes in the cases disclosed. The platform is quite useful for reaching people living in remote areas; however, it might be challenging to get an accurate picture of what is happening on the ground since the illiteracy rate in Morocco is 56.1%¹⁷ and there are also limitations of computer and internet access. Another challenge this platform is facing relates to its lack of public exposure and media coverage. Very few people know that such initiatives exist, hence the impact it has created so far is limited.

Civil society in Morocco is a legitimate candidate to advocate against corruption. Using new technologies and the internet as the main channel of outreach can tremendously boost its positioning as an effective stakeholder in eradicating corruption. Yet there are various obstacles that stand against mobilising the general public, namely the lack of government support and the lack of follow-up on such initiatives. Nevertheless, it could be too early to measure the impact created by platforms such as

9 www.transparency.org/research/bps2011

10 www.business-anti-corruption.com/country-profiles/middle-east-north-africa/morocco/general-information

11 www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8RgWRmRtUc

12 www.facebook.com/pages/contre-la-corruption-aum Maroc/158070820916805?sk=info

13 www.facebook.com/LutteContreLaCorruptionMaroc

14 www.facebook.com/TransparencyMorocco

15 www.mamdawrinch.com/main

16 As of 17 September 2012.

17 hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MAR.html

Mamdawrinch since it is still new. In the long run, it could eventually trigger citizens' integration in the anti-corruption policy-making process which awaits the lead of the Moroccan government.

The absence of online platforms powered by the government to report bribery cases directly has prompted the further interest of citizens in taking refuge using social and citizen media channels to divulge corruption cases and express their views about the phenomenon and how it should be tackled. One should question the reason why the potential of new technologies in combating corruption on a larger scale is still completely ignored by the government. Having an online anti-corruption mechanism and a reliable platform to denounce any illegal practices could have won back people's confidence in the Moroccan administrative system.

A rather shy effort by the government of Morocco to join the wave of open-data initiatives in order to reinforce the notion of public services transparency and the right to access information was the launch of a basic online platform including freely available electronic data.¹⁸ The website provides various ranges of statistics on the kingdom's key sectors. The website specifies that information is useful to researchers, journalists, private corporations or the public in general. However, the information listed is not frequently updated.

Integrating the use of new technologies, and more specifically the internet, while engaging the public in leading the battle against corruption seems to be the best strategy for governments. The information disclosed by citizens using online platforms to report on bribery cases could be used to map the sectors where corruption is widespread. It could also help centralise information and even engage the same people in suggesting new mechanisms or procedures to combat this phenomenon. Providing quantitative analyses of the cases reported can help gauge the knowledge gap and raise the public's awareness as to how much corruption costs a sluggish economy in a developing country like Morocco.

Conclusion

Although Morocco has been undergoing significant social and economic reforms during the last decade, the country still faces socio-political challenges. One of them is the widespread corruption at both the small and large scale including the country's political life. The concept of corruption is deeply rooted in the society and in people's

attitudes. People who pay bribes to get government services would justify their act and even call it a "gift" to make it sound acceptable. It makes it twice as hard to eradicate corruption if it is widely accepted in the culture.

Changing the public's perception and raising awareness about the negative impact of corruption on the economy is absolutely necessary in the case of Morocco. The Ministry of Education has recently launched an initiative in partnership with the Central Authority for the Prevention of Corruption to integrate a code of ethics in the schools' curriculum. The objective is to instil positive values at the heart of Moroccan society, using new strategies and educational programmes. This initiative is expected to foster the emergence of a generation able to fight against corruption and restore the principles of integrity and accountability in the society.¹⁹

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) have become an important pillar of democracy and human rights in a modern society. They expand citizen social mobilisation which can impact on policy and decision-making processes. They produce a better-informed and active citizen who is in a position to put pressure on national institutions to be accountable and responsive to citizens' needs and priorities.²⁰ Using ICTs is yet to be at the centre of the Moroccan government strategy to stamp out corruption. It is civil society organisations, citizen media and social media which are taking the lead in raising awareness about the issue and crowdsourcing information on bribery cases using the internet.

Action steps

Establishing a reliable and consistent e-governance mechanism allows individuals to exercise their political and civil rights and guarantees the accountability and transparency of the government, besides being a key tool in the fight against corruption.

Citizens must have a say in influencing or challenging public policies, monitoring the quality of public services, and suggesting a better way to handle procedures, since they are the ones directly affected by government decisions.

In the case of Morocco, using ICTs might not be the magic wand that will ensure more transparency and accountability on the part of the government.

¹⁹ www.e-taalim.com/fr/institutions/institutions-education/maroc-lutte-corruption-education.html

²⁰ www.spidercenter.org/sites/default/files/Increasing%20transparency%20and%20fighting%20corruption%20through%20ICT.pdf

¹⁸ data.gov.ma/Pages/Apropos.aspx

However, policies ought to be adjusted for those technologies to play a role in the fight against corruption, and that includes:

- Mobilising and empowering citizens by providing an online platform offering centralised information on corruption and encouraging the public to report bribery cases.
- Establishing web-based portals which should include all the administrative procedures in place to improve public sector transparency.
- Utilising ICTs in launching campaigns about corruption to build capacity amongst citizens on what it means and to what extent it negatively affects the economy.
- Automating public service application processes and introducing tracking systems online and via mobile services to follow up on administrative procedures.
- Investing in setting up a solid and reliable e-government system to completely cut out the role of the government's "middle persons". ■