

Mamfakinch: From Protest Slogan to Mediated Activism

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Mamfakinch, or “no concessions” in Moroccan Arabic, was a slogan of Moroccan Arab Spring protestors adopted by an activist blogging collective emerging from that moment. Through Mamfakinch, this article examines mediated activism and processes of public formation in a global media landscape. Situating Mamfakinch at the nexus of local contentious politics and transnational policy priorities, I trace Mamfakinch’s interventions across media platforms in analyzing the collective’s discursive construction and mediation of the 2012 Amina Filali affair. Suggesting that Mamfakinch constitutes an important moment in Moroccan media’s transition to the digital, I argue that the collective taps into newly networked and increasingly worldly youth digital cultures in constructing new processes of public formation and modes of publicness. This essay illustrates what Mamfakinch can teach us about emergent digital political cultures constructed around democratic conceptions of culture that are deliberately distant from institutional politics.

Keywords: global media, mediated activism, publics, digital culture, Morocco

In February 2011, Moroccan protestors took to the streets en masse, joining a wave of collective uprisings throughout North Africa and the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring. Morocco’s protest movement was referred to as *le Mouvement de 20 Février*, or M20, after the kingdom’s largest day of protests that led King Mohamed VI¹ to promise constitutional reform. *Mamfakinch*, a slogan of the protestors’ meaning “no concessions” in Moroccan Arabic, referenced the frequent co-optation of opposition movements by the regime and frustration with the slow pace of democratic reform.

While the initial wave of protests came and went, Mamfakinch remained the name adopted by an offshoot of M20 that developed into a powerful media organization. Modeled after the Tunisian website Nawaat.org, Mamfakinch defined itself as a citizen media portal composed of Moroccan activist bloggers valuing democracy, liberty, respect for human rights, and the right of access to information (Mamfakinch, 2011). Unlike Tunisia’s revolutionary orientation, Morocco’s protests were largely oriented toward reforming

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¹ Mohammed VI is the current king of Morocco, who is popularly referred to as “M6.” He took the throne in 1999 after the death of his totalitarian father, Hassan II, and is widely popular because of his “prince of the people” persona and reformist agenda, although few of those reforms have resulted in any meaningful change to the governing authority of the monarchy.

the existing system, with a focus on limiting the political power of the monarchy and its allies. In this moment, Mamfakinch served several functions aimed at exerting pressure on authorities to accelerate reform: compiling live coverage of protests, circulating both reformist and revolutionary culture, distributing news to both Moroccan and foreign media, and sharing foreign news coverage with Moroccans—all with the aim of making information accessible to average citizens (Akalay, 2011). In less than a year, Mamfakinch had more than 1 million unique visitors to its site, was attacked by pro-regime groups, and won the 2012 Google/Global Voices Breaking Borders Award. What was initially a blog-based platform for aggregating information about protests and dispelling rumors about the M20 movement eventually developed into a space for discussion and analysis of political agendas that continued to curate and circulate content about M20 and social change in Morocco.

Mamfakinch was founded by three bloggers, all activists involved in multiple online initiatives. Approximately 30 bloggers comprised the collective at its height, with 10 to 12 activists emerging as its core over time. This core was required to have a postsecondary degree, although the public was invited to submit material for publication. Operating through mailing lists, Google Docs, and occasional meetings or Skype sessions, the collective debated ideas for essays and articles, posted through Posterous, translated and edited information from other sources, and located its site on a server in Switzerland. Several developments created the conditions of possibility for Mamfakinch's success: Morocco's investments in telecommunications infrastructure and the growth of Internet subscribers, which grew by 60% between 2005 and 2010 (Ibahrine, 2004); technological affordances associated with the digital, specifically the rise of user-generated content, access to a wide variety of cultural forms, and the possibility of anonymity; and finally, a transgressive cultural politics online centering on the production and circulation of texts, including irreverent or sarcastic humor previously relegated to interpersonal communications.

Emerging out of these dynamics, Mamfakinch fundamentally challenged the gatekeeping power of the state. The site became a forum for interaction outside the purview of the state in an environment where media have long been closely linked with those in power, and, in the midst of an historically authoritarian political and media culture, the collective challenged official narratives and state media blackouts. Additionally, Mamfakinch's mediation of protests and protest culture created processes of public formation across diverse geographic and social spaces from the local to the global, expanding the range of relevant approaches and actors. Mamfakinch operated across linguistic and cultural boundaries that constitute split publics (Iddins, 2015; Rajagopal, 2001), adopting an inclusive approach to language across hierarchies of French, Arabic, and English. The loosely networked publics that emerged employed discourses and networks of protest associated with the Arab Spring moment to articulate claims for increased accountability from the state.

Mamfakinch is one manifestation of an emergent independent media² in Morocco that is creating new discursive spaces across platforms—in this case, with a noncommercial and explicitly activist bent. The Moroccan regime's liberal attitude toward the Internet in its early days led to its construction as a radically democratic and unregulated space—an understanding that has shifted as high-profile crackdowns on

² When I say independent media, I mean non-state, unaffiliated Moroccan media as distinct from government, partisan and union-backed publications.

individual actors, including some associated with Mamfakinch, have made the Internet a new frontier for Moroccan civil society's long-standing struggles over human rights. Initiatives like Mamfakinch resulted in formation of "flexible publics," or processes which primarily exist around the periphery of political life, occasionally coalescing around specific claims in highly visible ways that cannot be ignored, both by a monarchy not accustomed to responding to its citizen-subjects and global civil society. Ultimately, Mamfakinch constitutes an important moment in Moroccan media's transition to the digital and a key site for understanding emergent digital cultures constructed around democratic conceptions of culture that are deliberately distant from institutional politics.

Mediated Activism and New Modes of Publicness

This article uses Mamfakinch to analyze how digital platforms and practices are creating new affordances for mediated activism and reshaping publics in the process. I contend Mamfakinch taps into newly networked and increasingly worldly youth digital cultures in constructing new processes of public formation and modes of publicness. The site acts as a platform for a multiplicity of publics disillusioned with institutional politics and unaccustomed to making direct demands of power. In doing so, it allows for making traditionally private conversations public and leverages transnational networks against national politics. Mamfakinch's production and circulation of oppositional culture taps into the widespread frustration with corruption and constant co-optation that made Mamfakinch such a successful Arab Spring slogan in the first place. Mamfakinch members, like many other independent media producers, frequently talk about bypassing established media organizations in producing "real" stories. This suggests the symbolic systems advanced by the state are somehow not real, or at the very least do not represent the everyday realities and value systems inhabited by many Moroccans. Mamfakinch opens up space for defiant claims that publics are no longer willing to make concessions on certain democratic norms and values.

Situating Mamfakinch at the nexus of local contentious politics and transnational policy priorities, I trace Mamfakinch's interventions across media platforms in analyzing the collective's discursive construction and mediation of the 2012 Amina Filali affair. To do this, I conducted a discourse analysis of Mamfakinch as an organization, building an archive of the collective's work from 2011 through 2014, when the site ceased publication. The arguments presented here are primarily textually based, although I conducted supplemental interviews with several Mamfakinch members to contextualize its work.³ This study

³ Living in Rabat in 2010–11, I followed Mamfakinch from its inception in addition to other mediated discourses around the Arab Spring. Returning to Morocco in 2012, I contacted Mamfakinch through its website and communicated with Hisham Almiraat about interviews with the collective. As members of the collective are located in many places around the world, I e-mailed with Samia Errazzouki and Zineb Belmkadden, and met in person with Nizar Bennamate in a café in the Gauthier neighborhood of Casablanca. These first contacts were primarily oriented toward questions about Mamfakinch's origins, operations, and the challenges it was responding to in Morocco's political climate. In 2014, I again met with Bennamate and also with Omar Radi in Casablanca to discuss the demise of Mamfakinch and the state of Moroccan media in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. After many attempts to meet with Hisham Almiraat, who acts as spokesperson for the group, we were finally able to have a lengthy Skype conversation in May 2015.

starts by discussing Mamfakinch's origins and operations before situating them in the literature on mediated activism and publics. To understand Mamfakinch's interventions, I then conduct a close reading of the collective's participation in mobilizations around the Amina Filali affair, when a 16-year-old girl swallowed rat poison in March 2012 after being forced to marry her rapist.

In global media studies, much attention is given to extreme cases of authoritarianism in media-state relations as well as economic powerhouses such as the BRIC nations—cases like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and India. What gets left out or glossed over tend to be the gray areas inhabited by many societies around the globe, where degrees of freedom are intermixed with distinct limits and smaller domestic audiences make industries necessarily transnational. In regard to the emergent field of digital studies, I make the case that the digital must be understood as part of intermedia relationships and convergences. Mamfakinch only makes sense as a response to the limitations of Morocco's media system and in the context of a genealogy of digital infrastructure development imagined as a tool for economic growth, useful for consolidating the power of the state rather than challenging it. These dynamics are not unique to Morocco, but are relevant to many nations of the Global South that underwent World Bank-coordinated economic restructuring in the 1980s, opening up to flows of capital and culture from elsewhere, as well as nations whose media systems combine strong state influence with neoliberal tendencies.

Contentious Politics and Flexible Publics

This work is based in the literature on mediated activism, which is born out of the work on contentious politics and social movements, as well as that on publics and the public sphere. Kraidy (2014) argues for consideration of "contentious politics as an important force shaping the development of media industries" (p. 40). Contentious politics emerge out of the convergence between contention, politics, and collective action, and involve "interactive, collective making of claims that bear on other people's interests and involve governments as claimants, objects of claims, or third parties" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 23). The emergence of independent media as a social and political force in Moroccan contentious politics has changed the dynamics of contention by publicizing democratic deficits and working with domestic and transnational civil society to challenge the discursive hegemony of the monarchy. Media's affordances for communicating with mass audiences mean they have the potential to play instrumental roles in coordinating and orchestrating collective action, while taking advantage of technological change to expand the repertoires available to those outside traditionally centralized media systems. Tarrow (2005) argues that transnational activists are "both constrained and supported by domestic networks; that in making this move they activate transitional processes between states and international politics; and that when they return home, they bring with them new forms of action, new ways of framing domestic issues, and perhaps new identities that may someday fuse domestic with international contention" (pp. 2–3). In the case of Morocco, the embedding of independent media in human rights networks oriented toward freedom of expression shape their engagements with publics across multiple scales.

The contentious politics and social movement literature tends to focus on change orchestrated through institutional channels, neglecting to look outside the political realm for processes of change in other areas of social life. It would be easy to say that Morocco has seen little change in recent decades due to the

continuing political power of the *makhzen*,⁴ but that would be dismissive of the agency orchestrated by ordinary people every day. Bayat (2013) calls this “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” or the ways in which the urban dispossessed infringe on the powerful, and constitutes just one way that orchestrations of agency evolve in accordance with constraints (p. 45). In Morocco, media are producing spaces for debate and contention among multiple modernities while making Moroccan society, especially the margins, present to those in power in previously impossible ways. Initiatives like Mamfakinch do this by emphasizing and mobilizing urban youth culture in particular, framing culture as a (more democratic) site of contention and encounter amidst widespread disillusionment with institutional politics.

The emergent global media literature on mediated activism concerned with the nature of online contention in various contexts is instructive in making sense of Mamfakinch. Zayani (2015), Sreberny and Khiabany (2010), and Yang (2009) all make arguments about the implications of the digital for the relationship between publics and power in authoritarian states. Their work focuses on understanding dynamics of contention online as rooted in local articulations of multiple forces, many of which are transnational in nature and historically contingent. Zayani (2015) contends that transformations in the media environment of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are changing the nature of political engagement through “new ways of creating, consuming and using information” (p. 6), a point that is borne out by Mamfakinch. Emphasized across this literature are digital cultures and practices that are not first and foremost political, but rather for a myriad of purposes, including sociability and entertainment. In China, Yang (2009) argues that the Internet offers a platform for “humor, play, and irreverence” while also being “participatory and contentious” (p. 15), and that these creative aspects of online culture extend beyond politics. Zayani (2015) makes a similar argument about digital spaces of contention in Tunisia, emphasizing the myriad social forces at play and the ways in which articulations online may not be “necessarily politically framed, but are political in other ways” (p. 13), and the challenges these spaces pose in an authoritarian society.

In their book about blogging in Iran, Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) take up digital challenges to authoritarianism in arguing that “the blogistan has become a space of contention between the people and the state” (p. 5). They emphasize that any attempt to account for this phenomenon must address the porous nature of authoritarianism in the country and the contradictory role of the state in developing ICTs while simultaneously attempting to manage ideological challenges to its authority. Similar to Morocco, “in Iran, the closure of many press titles meant the opening up of websites carrying news and editorials, while blogs contain new material not available within the regime-controlled channel” (p. 10). Sreberny and Khiabany situate blogging within a longer historical trajectory of revolution and pro-democracy movements without reducing blogging to an inherently political act. In Morocco, we see the state occupying a similar

⁴ *Makhzen* is a Moroccan Arabic word meaning “storehouse,” which was used to refer to the state in the form of a governing establishment revolving around the sultan and associated notables in various sectors. More recently, it has come to stand in for an extensive system of royal privilege and clientelism associated with the contemporary Moroccan state. This “deep state” surrounding the monarchy is understood to be the real center of power in Moroccan political life, despite the existence of parliament and other ostensibly democratic institutions.

contradictory role, especially as the Internet became a refuge for Moroccan independent journalists after the prosecution of their print publications, which intersected with a community of Moroccan bloggers (including members of Mamfakinch), known as *blogoma*, in testing the boundaries of online expression.

Flexible Publics

As indicated above, activism depends on collective claim making and dynamics of contention in the public sphere. Publics occupy a principle place in this process, and as the rise of mass media offered new arenas of sociocultural interaction, so too the digital has shifted forms and forums for interaction. For Morocco, thinking about activism and social change necessitates looking outside the realm of institutional politics to attempts to engage publics through culture. Warner's (2002) conception of a textual public is organized by discourse, sovereign in relation to the state, and involves the attention of a populace unknowable until its address. Discursive struggles are increasingly taking place online, and processes of mediation associated with the digital are producing new kinds of publics and possibilities. Benkler (2006) argues that a new stage of the information economy is emerging that is defined by networks where the "coordinate effects of the uncoordinated actions of a wide and diverse range of individuals and organizations, acting on a wide range of motivations" results in the "peer production of knowledge, information and culture" (p. 5). Collaborative projects like Mamfakinch are indicative of the extent to which peer production of knowledge and information is expanding the array of relevant actors, realms of collaboration, and opportunities to learn from and work with other initiatives—all associated with more democratic understandings of culture and a plane of politics that extends beyond the nation.

In the digital era, scholars (Ito, 2008; Punathambekar, 2010) have increasingly focused on the specific nature of different types of publics, specifically those associated with particular platforms and political contexts, as we see in respective formulations of networked and mobile publics. Ito's (2008) concept of "networked publics" centers on digitally networked media that include the possibility of multidirectional information flows. Publics are networked in that they are increasingly active and able to both input and extract information at will, creating new possibilities for participation and sociability both in and outside of institutional politics. In addressing the role of the mobile phone in the context of popular culture and ethno-national politics in Northeast India, Punathambekar (2010) posits "mobile publics" as fluid and ephemeral publics allowing for "the articulation of new cultural and political possibilities that might not be possible in more formal institutional settings" (p. 251). My theorization of flexible publics builds on Ito (2008) and Punathambekar's (2010) earlier platform-based work, while responding to Cody's (2011) call for focus on the means by which publics are constituted and how media structures are central to understanding publics.

This evolution in understanding of publics indicates shifts in platforms for interaction, particularly in relation to the rise of the digital. As a blog-based platform that expanded its presence across other media outlets and social media to podcasting and even aspirations for a Web-based TV channel, Mamfakinch moved across platforms, engaging in an intermedia process of assembling publics. Flexible publics are conceived as this process of assembling publics across platforms, practices (including language) and politics that relies on increasingly democratic and dialogical affordances rooted in the digital and its capacity for intermedia interactions. While Warner's (2002) initial conception of publics is one that is shifting and flexible, it does not account for processes of assembly or the ways in which changes in texts' production, circulation, and

adaptation can be accounted for. Mapping the minutiae of Mamfakinch's Amina Filali mediations is an attempt to elucidate what Warner calls the "elusive strangeness" that is rooted in publics' self-creating and self-organized nature, and what emerges are flexible publics as process.

"Flexibility" is meant in multiple senses: the flexibility to move between platforms, to tackle diverse issues, to move between online and off-line spaces, to respond quickly to the maneuverings of power, to reinvent initiatives, and, perhaps most importantly, the ideological flexibility to build support among disparate groups. Mamfakinch's coalition building among sometimes unlikely allies fundamentally involves attempts to construct a viable opposition through orientations toward broad-based values like human rights and dignity. In the midst of disillusionment with institutional politics there is the sense that a more democratic culture has the potential to be generative in a way that institutional politics does not. Flexible publics constitute a process of articulation that seeks to expand the social imaginary and find resonance among diverse and diffuse subjectivities, ultimately seeking to reconstruct the relationship between individuals and the state, as well as shift boundaries along the private-public continuum.

Mamfakinch!

On February 17, 2011, Mamfakinch came online. The site's first post was an open letter dated January 29, 2011, addressed to King Mohammed VI and Moroccan citizens calling for democratic reform. Inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, the letter states: "Morocco is in a phase of setbacks and recoil in its democratic project. The social and economic situation of large segments of the Moroccan people is cause for great concern in conjunction with rampant cronyism and a rent-based economy" ("An Open Letter to King Mohammed VI," 2011, para. 2). It then calls for dismissing the current government and dissolving parliament, forming a national committee that would represent the interests of all communities to draft a democratic constitution based on a parliamentary monarchy, various measures oriented toward social and economic justice, and further investigation into the misuse of public funds and human rights violations. It ends with: "Morocco and Moroccans deserve a smooth and rapid transition to democracy," (para. 4) followed by 31 names, including that of Mamfakinch's cofounder Hisham Khribchi, who also goes by Hisham Almiraat. The letter was an echo of the call put out January 29, 2011, by *Touria wa dimo9ratia I2an*, or "Freedom and democracy now" on Facebook, calling for a demonstration on February 20. At this point, planning for the February 20 demonstration was well underway, as Mamfakinch's third post of 28 that day is an embed of a February 20 campaign video produced by Montassir Drissi that went viral, featuring first-person accounts from young activists about why they would be demonstrating February 20, including Mamfakinch contributor Nizar Bennamate. Already, rumors and attempts to discredit the organizers were circulating, and one of Mamfakinch's primary goals was to provide a reliable portal for aggregating information about the demonstration. To this end, the majority of the 28 posts on the site's first day of existence were endorsements from political parties, NGOs, and trade unions, including Marxists, socialists, Islamists, human rights activists, and two trade unions—UMT and CDT. Importantly, Mamfakinch aggregated all these statements and endorsements in one place, linking to press releases and original stories in other media outlets, and providing some sense of who intended to participate and for what purpose.

What is clear from Mamfakinch's first few weeks is the extent to which a battle of information took place around initial demonstrations. The site placed itself on the front lines of that battle by responding to rumors, press coverage, and the needs of a nascent movement. In attempts to dissuade participants,

allegations abounded that this was a Polisario conspiracy, an anti-monarchy protest, and that the leaders were morally questionable characters.⁵ The state news agency, MAP, printed a press release announcing that the demonstration had been cancelled (MAP, 2011), which turned out to be false. Mamfakinch became a channel to talk back to these allegations, but also for expressing support, circulating plans and slogans, explanatory videos about the demonstrations, and for admonishing against violence and vandalism. On the day of the demonstration, it became the site for mapping and documenting protests taking place around the country. Use of digital technologies in a society with a relatively new relationship with the digital led to accusations about their potential to lead people astray. A limited democratization of the information environment was taking place, and it led to less dependency on official narratives advanced by the state, both to its own people and to the international community, with Mamfakinch moving back and forth across these spaces.

Mamfakinch's contributions to debates surrounding the Amina Filali affair are indicative of the collective's engagement with dynamics of contention coming out of the Arab Spring moment. While this case is representative of the diverse campaigns to which the collective contributed, in no way do I wish to suggest that this moment or its outcome was produced or orchestrated entirely by Mamfakinch. Women's rights groups had been campaigning to repeal Article 475 for years and led the way in raising awareness of Filali's case. I want to stress that Mamfakinch's members are particularly adept at using digital tools to pool relevant commentary, putting local and global press into the conversation, publicizing and documenting events, and activating activist-journalist-civil society networks to exert pressure on those in power. The collective moved between online and off-line spaces in provoking debate and harnessing the public imagination for ongoing activist campaigns, in addition to launching some of its own initiatives. Mamfakinch operated as one piece of an emergent activist information infrastructure that was particularly effective in using digital tools to aggregate and curate conversations, as well as to provide big-picture analysis about the relevance of individual campaigns for broader social change in Morocco.⁶

The Amina Filali Affair

Amina El Filali was a 16-year-old who swallowed rat poison in March 2012 after being forced to marry her rapist and suffering subsequent abuse in a village near the seaside town of Larache, Morocco. Her suicide sparked a wave of protests that focused their outrage on Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which is often interpreted to allow rapists to avoid prosecution if they marry their victims.⁷ These protests took place both in physical space and, perhaps to a greater extent, online, through diverse mobilizations

⁵ Polisario is a Saharawi liberation movement in the Western Sahara supported by Algeria and, to a lesser extent, Spain. Both the monarchy and Morocco's policy in the Western Sahara (that the area is fundamental to the territorial integrity of the Moroccan nation) are understood to be "red lines" for Moroccan society, making them off limits to public critique.

⁶ Mamfakinch bloggers contribute to the site under names including mamfakinch, basta, ibn kafka, nietzschan, demokratia karama, feb20democracy, and others. Unless the bloggers have been open online about their identities off-line, I refer to them by the pseudonyms under which they publish on the site.

⁷ The provision is not unique to Morocco. Similar laws exist in Tunisian, Algerian, Jordanian and Lebanese law, although many have been repealed in recent years.

such as the #RIPamina hashtag on Twitter, a "#RIPamina: No to Rape With the Complicity of the State" Facebook page, a documentary film titled *475: When Marriage Becomes Punishment*, as well as countless blog posts, editorials, and local news stories. Filali's story was picked up by global news organizations such as Al Jazeera, *Le Monde*, the BBC, and *The New York Times*, which ran multiple stories, including a follow-up in January 2014 when Article 475 was successfully overturned. Moroccan media activists associated with Mamfakinch participated in attempts to attract the attention of global media and civil society to this issue while also engaging in more localized contentious politics. In its multi-scaled interventions, Mamfakinch was forced to negotiate tensions between representations of Arab and Muslim women as embedded in a patriarchal political culture, and women as autonomous actors possessing reflexive subjectivities empowering them to affect change.

Before Filali's suicide, Morocco was already embroiled in dynamics of protest and repression, as well as anxieties accompanying the first few months of a new Islamist government. Protests carried on from the previous year, especially in the northern Rif region, where activists associated with M20 demonstrated against the rural mountainous region's widespread poverty and economic marginalization in January and February 2012, marking the one-year anniversary of M20. Police violence and activist arrests led to new waves of protests, and on March 14 a Rabat demonstration in solidarity with the Rif was violently dispersed by police, allegedly because it was unauthorized (Karam, 2012). The previous day, Mamfakinch had launched the "MediatizeRif" campaign, calling for an end to the media blackout on these events. Mamfakinch retweeted from one of its contributors "RT @YassirKazar: MAP doesn't want to cover what's happening? No worries. Citizens will take care of it #MediatizeRif" (Mamfakinch, 2012a). Mamfakinch began live-blogging coverage of protests, continued circulating the few stories being published and reached out to international outlets.

It was in this environment that news of Filali's March 10 suicide broke via an article in the independent newspaper *Al Massae*. Bloggers and social media reacted immediately, with one blogger attesting "Amina is my Bouazizi" (Idrissi, 2012).⁸ On March 13, Almiraat picked up the story on Twitter, asking if anyone knew of additional sources and monitoring the spread of the #RIPamina hashtag across the globe. Almiraat used Storify to compile relevant materials and produce a timeline and narrative of developments in the case, while encouraging Al Jazeera's "The Stream," which focuses on social media, to pick up the story. "@AJStream Follow hashtag #RIPamina. It mourns 16 yo Moroccan who committed suicide after being forced 2 marry her rapist w/parent's consent" (Almiraat, 2012a). On March 15 the Democratic League of Women's Rights organized a sit-in of several hundred people in front of the Larache tribunal as part of its campaign against Article 475 (Bruneau, 2012). Article 475 does not explicitly address rape, but rather the "kidnapping or deception" of a minor, for which the perpetrator cannot be prosecuted once the victim "has married her abductor" ("Viol," 2012, para. 7). The Filali affair comes on the heels of March 8, International Women's Day, when the secularist Alternative Movement for Individual Liberties (MALI) published a manifesto titled "State! You Rape Us: March 8, 2012 Manifesto" (MALI, 2012). Posted on Vox Maroc, the blog of journalist and MALI militant Zineb El Rhazoui, the statement inscribes the fight for gender equality within human rights and voices concerns about the role of religion in Moroccan law, especially

⁸ This is a reference to Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, whose December 2010 self-immolation has become famous for igniting widespread protests in Tunisia that resulted in regime change.

pertaining to women. "The Moroccan state holds onto archaic laws inspired by religion, making it an accomplice in the crimes committed everyday against women and their dignity" (MALI, 2012, para. 8). By way of example, the statement points to Article 475 and calls for a campaign against the law, citing testimonies of women being prosecuted for prostitution when they report rape and being married to their rapists, which absolves the state because spousal rape is not recognized in Morocco—all of which indicate that the controversy surrounding Article 475 preceded Filali.

On March 14, the "#RIPamina: No to Rape With the Complicity of the State" Facebook page came online courtesy of Houda Chaloun. The page articulates six demands, including prosecution of Filali's rapist (who remained free), immediate repeal of Article 475 as it is "in flagrant contradiction with the treaties and international conventions ratified by Morocco," a redefinition of rape and harsher penalties in the penal code, better judicial training and enforcement, and help for all women suffering similar fates as Filali (#RIPamina, 2012, para. 9). The page also called for a sit-in in front of parliament on March 17 and commissioned graphic artist Faïçal Oulharir to design posters and T-shirts. Mamfakinch first posted about #RIPamina on March 17, when it shared a Global Voices article about the #RIPamina protest page that included information about and Almiraat's Storify compilation of the sit-in. Mamfakinch contributor Zineb Belmkaddem, who is open about her own experience with domestic abuse, live tweeted the sit-in. The protest brought together multiple generations of feminists, including UAF, a secular feminist organization in operation since 1987, and Woman Choufouch, an antiharassment organization formed by students in 2011. According to Fatima Outaleb of UAF, "We know that in Morocco when women are united, it pays. The problem is that there is a crisis of leadership among the women's movement . . . women are divided and the left has been divided. . . . We have to say, there is no compromise. The law should be adopted now. No excuses" (Alpert, 2012, para. 13-15). Filali's case highlights the stark stratification of access to resources, education, and assistance from associations for women of different class and geographic backgrounds, as well as associated ideological divisions in the women's movement and publics more broadly.

Remarkably, the sit-in was broadcast live by state TV station 2M. One Mamfakinch contributor tweeted "RT @__Ghali: Bravo to 2M for covering the demonstration live! Props! #RIPamina" (Ibn Kafka, 2012b). Two days earlier, 2M invited the Minister of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development, Bassima Hakkaoui, and Nouzha Skalli, who held Hakkaoui's position in the previous government, to discuss Filali. Hakkaoui, the only woman minister in the new Parti de la Justice et du Développement (Justice and Development Party) (PJD) government, had already been the subject of scrutiny from secularists, given that she wears the hijab, which is unusual among Morocco's political class (Boukhari, 2012). On 2M, Hakkaoui called for a debate to reform the law, but subsequently made several controversial statements about the case, including suggesting that women's rights groups were damaging Morocco's reputation. Hakkaoui also reportedly told blog-based news platform *Yabiladi* that "Article 475 is unlikely to be repealed overnight under pressure from international public opinion. Sometimes the marriage of a raped woman to her rapist does not harm her" (Belabd, 2012, para. 1). For Mamfakinch, an organization that had just launched a campaign to bring media attention to horrific events in the Rif, 2M's eagerness to cover the Filali tragedy might have seemed a convenient distraction on an issue clearly supported by the monarchy, as seen by its initiative in

the 2004 *Moudawana*⁹ reforms. On March 17, Almiraat shared a tweet supposedly from 2M's news director Samira Sitail: "RT @SamiraSitail: @YassirKazar I ordered that we broadcast #RIPamina to eclipse Mamfakinch's #MediatizeRif operation" (Almiraat, 2012e), although the @SamiraSitail account is now marked as fake.

Several petitions were circulated, including on petitionduweb.com and ipetitions.com, that led Almiraat to tweet, "A petition that is supposed to invoke international solidarity written only in French? We lose a lot my friends. #RIPamina" (Almiraat, 2012f), indicating strategic thinking about mobilizing publics transnationally. A petition addressed to Morocco's ministers on Avaaz.org stated, "Since 2006, the government has been promising to pass a law to stop violence against women, but has failed to do so. As concerned global citizens, we call on you to stand with women by immediately repealing Article 475 and passing comprehensive legislation addressing violence against women" ("RIP Amina," 2012, para. 1). Ultimately the petition in Arabic secured almost 1.2 million signatures, and a corresponding one in English more than 700,000 ("RIP Amina," 2012). Many of the #RIPamina tweets were shared by petition signees such as Mamfakinch contributor Bennamate: "Just signed a petition urging @benkiraneabdel to stop violence against women and repeal Article 475 #RIPamina #Morocco" (Bennamate, 2012). Others expressed outrage at the situation, blaming tradition, Moroccan culture, or Islam¹⁰ as a backward and violent religion in its treatment of women. On March 17, Almiraat tweeted, "Islamophobes jumping on the bandwagon 2 label #RIPamina as a case of Islamic law enforced on women. Know this: This has nothing 2 do w/Islam" (Almiraat, 2012b). This is just one way Mamfakinch positions itself between Morocco and the world, challenging both local practices and power structures as well as Orientalist perspectives and international interventions. The organization curates information specifically for the West and international NGOs as well as Moroccans to broaden the array of narratives coming out of the country, but also does not hesitate to critique those actors and institutions. Mamfakinch contributor Ibn Kafka, who self describes on his blog as "a Moroccan lawyer on probation," also took on the idea that Article 475 was rooted in Islam by tracing the legal origins of article 475 to pre-revolutionary French law, saying "it is not because of the Islamization of Moroccan law that this rule exists, but because of its Gallicization" (Ibn Kafka, 2012a, para. 43).

Meanwhile, Mamfakinch continued to engage in debates around the Filali case, circulating blog posts, news articles, and statements from human rights organizations. On March 20, Mamfakinch tweeted simply "[#RIPamina] It's not your fault," and linked to the blog of a Moroccan woman who published a testimonial of her rape at the age of 17 under that heading (Lamqaddem, 2012). Mamfakinch contributor Errazzouki appeared on Al Jazeera's "The Stream" as part of a panel discussion devoted to Filali, asking

⁹ The *Moudawana* is Morocco's family code, which was originally drafted in 1957 and reformed in 2004 after decades of activism and in a political context where a young monarch was in the process of cultivating a progressive image. The reforms resulted in Morocco being lauded as a leader among Arab and Muslim nations in putting in place a legal framework oriented toward gender equality. Among other changes, the *Moudawana* specifically outlaws marriage under the age of 18, but in practice the marriage of minors continued to be common.

¹⁰ One tweet included in Almiraat's Storify account from user @JustLuai stated "#RIPamina. What a disaster. Look at what the wrong perspective of Islam leads to. I bet there are hundreds of similar stories" (Ahmed, 2012).

whether Filali was already changing mentalities about rape in Morocco given the circulation of anonymous rape testimonies online in the aftermath of her suicide (“In Morocco, Legal Loophole Questioned,” 2012). As debates continued, it became apparent that Filali’s case was not unique, nor was Morocco’s legal provision for rapists to marry their minor victims. On March 27, Mamfakinch published an excerpt from anonymous testimonies shared on *Qandisha*, a collaborative women’s e-zine founded by journalist and activist Fedwa Misk in 2011, linking to the testimonials in their entirety (Mamfakinch, 2012d). *Qandisha*, like Mamfakinch, is another example of online platforms opening up alternative discursive spaces from which to question the status quo.

In all of these cases, public ire was primarily directed at Article 475, and the PJD government, specifically Hakkaoui, Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, and Minister of Justice and Freedom Mustapha Ramid. The new PJD government, which had itself been adept in the use of social media, became the target of appeals directly to officials online: “@PJDOfficiel #PJD we demand urgent reform #RIPamina #Maroc” (Benaj, 2012; see Almiraat, 2012c). In a press conference, Mustafa Khalfi, Minister of Communication and spokesman for the Benkirane government, stated, “This girl was raped twice, the second time when she was married. . . . This situation needs to be investigated thoroughly with the possibility of increasing the penalties in the context of reforming article 475. We cannot ignore this drama” (Jazouani, 2012, para. 6). Meanwhile Hakkaoui’s statements showed less conviction and more contradiction, as she refused to clearly state whether she would take the legislative lead on such reforms. Ramid added to the furor by issuing a statement that questioned many facts of the case, including whether Filali was actually raped, saying, “The young Amina had a relationship outside marriage with the man who later married her, a relationship during which she lost her virginity” (Amar, 2012, para. 33; Ministry of Justice, 2012). The lack of clarity in the government’s response and elaboration of concrete steps toward reform exacerbated already existing anxieties among civil society (especially from secularists and the left) about the regression of human rights—especially women’s rights—under the PJD.

On March 23, Hakkaoui, Ramid, and Lahbib Choubani, minister of relations with parliament and civil society, held a press conference about the Filali affair. The event was live tweeted by Mamfakinch contributors Karim El Hajjaji and Omar Radi among others under the hashtag #debatBassima. According to tweets, the ministers gave long-winded, off-topic introductions and emphasized that society bears the responsibility for Filali’s tragedy. The ministers took questions, and in a country where sex outside marriage is illegal according to Article 490 of the penal code, Radi prefaced his question to the minister of justice by stating directly that he cohabitates with his girlfriend. Radi was cut off by Ramid, who advised him not to continue admitting to breaking the law for fear of arrest. When Radi continued, the microphone was taken away from him. Later that day, Mamfakinch shared a Storify account of the debate that ended with the tweet, “Summary: ‘In Morocco no sex before marriage and no rape when it is only a street girl’ #WhatElse #RipAmina #debatBassima” (Lesage, 2012; see Mamfakinch, 2012c). Mamfakinch also published an episode of the sketch show *Webnates*¹¹ that ridiculed the importance of virginity, the double standard for men and

¹¹ *Bnates* means “girls” in Moroccan Arabic. *Webnates* features impersonations of diverse Moroccan women in the middle of humorous confessionals to their webcams about a variety of topics. It was commissioned by Morocco’s first Web TV station, *Yek TV*, and was particularly controversial and often accused of being vulgar.

women, and the fact that many women have sex lives with the intention of re-creating their virginity surgically if it becomes a problem later (Mamfakinch, 2012b; Webnates, 2012). The fetishization of virginity in Morocco and elsewhere often means that once a woman is no longer a virgin, her chances of marriage are practically nonexistent, and she is dependent on her family for long-term support, constituting an economic burden, as well as a mark on the family's honor. It then becomes more acceptable to consider rape as merely a premarital indiscretion by marrying the woman to her rapist.

The next day, the exchange between Radi and Minister Ramid made the front page of *Al Massae*. Almiraat (2012d) wrote a blog post in support of Radi titled "PJD Hates Love—#RIPamina #DebatBassima," saying, "In Morocco in 2012, our political leaders continue to be divorced from reality and denial of their era, perpetuating the hypocrisy of a society that refuses to look in the mirror. The readily authoritarian attitude of the ministers, on the other hand, speaks volumes about the state of mind of those who govern this country today" (Almiraat, 2012d, para. 4). Almiraat also produced a simple graphic poster with white and black text against an orange background with one side showing a man and a woman embracing with the text "-marriage = haram" and on the other side a man holding a gun to a woman with the text "+marriage = halal" (Almiraat, 2012d). The #RIPamina Facebook page shared Almiraat's poster and associated blog post, which elicited mixed reactions. One user posted:

" Hold on a minute . . . the purpose of the page is to defend a victim and abolish certain practices that are outside logic and outside religion . . . but talking about a journalist who lives with his concubine?! . . . How is that related? . . . We are talking about the noble cause of Amina . . . taking advantage of the situation to talk about repressed sexuality, really it's unacceptable. We are in a Muslim country and we are all against these practices— just to be clear—and thank you" (Yakine, 2012).

This led another user to reply:

"I think the author of the article wants to highlight the moral double standard that condemns sex between two consenting people who are not married, yet accepts that a rapist marries his victim. It's sick. So, there is a connection" (Azuagh, 2012).

That evening Hakkaoui participated in a roundtable organized by *Al Massae* about Filali's suicide at Casablanca's Royal Mansour Hotel along with Filali's parents and several civil society leaders. Filali's rapist-turned-husband was also invited, leading Mamfakinch contributor Errazzouki to tweet, "Bassima Hakkaoui apologetically defending Amina's rapist and inviting him to a conference. This is sheer absurdity. #RIPamina" (Errazzouki, 2012). Again, Omar Radi attended the roundtable, tweeting, "Slogans in the room. General outrage. #Almassaeconf #Ripamina" (Radi, 2012b), and "Ryadi¹²: Stop talking about the facts of the #RIPamina case, talk about causes and change the law" (Radi, 2012a). In a country that requires journalists to have official press credentials, many who attended the Amina Filali events were bloggers or activists engaged in the online furor, a fact that Almiraat referenced the following year as part of a UNESCO conference about freedom of expression online. "Even without a press card, there were micro-bloggers at

¹² "Ryadi" refers to a statement made by Khadijah Riyadi, head of AMDH, who was participating in the roundtable.

the press conferences on the high-speed rail line (TGV), and also during the explanations of . . . Hakkaoui and the family of Amina Filali in 2012" (Mamfakinch, 2013, para. 5), demonstrating a broader understanding of cultural producers accompanying a rise in mediated activism.¹³

On January 22, 2014, nearly two years after Filali's suicide, Morocco's parliament voted unanimously to eliminate the clause of Article 475 allowing rapists of minors to escape prosecution by marrying their victims (Alami, 2014). That day *H24Info* journalist and Mamfakinch contributor Bennamate tweeted, "It's official! Article 475 is amended! #RIPamina" (Bennamate, 2014b) and linking to his article about the amendment, which states "the proposed amendment was brought by several parliamentary groups, including l'USFP, le PPS et le PAM," indicating that the governing PJD did not take the legislative lead in amending the law (Bennamate, 2014a, para. 1). While amending Article 475 is just the beginning, the debates that erupted in the aftermath of Filali's suicide, and Mamfakinch's engagements in them, highlight the intersection of local contentious politics, state media blackouts, emergent youth digital cultures, Islamist anxieties at home and abroad, and transnational mediated activism. The resonance of Filali's case with widespread post-9/11 Orientalist discourses about Islam and the MENA region surely influenced its uptake internationally, whereas new information infrastructures emerging out of the Arab Spring moment allowed civil society to seize on the issue while also speaking back to those discourses. As part of that information infrastructure, Mamfakinch crafted and curated counterdiscourses to both explanations rooted in Islam and tradition, as well as those coming from the PJD government, while providing a platform for the assembly of diverse publics across a range of issues.

After Mamfakinch

Mamfakinch is just one site that contributed to new processes of public formation and modes of publicness in Morocco, ultimately participating in the construction of an emergent digital political culture. The collective's intermedia process of public assembly—what I call flexible publics—depended on its ability to marshal technological, linguistic, and conceptual repertoires across multiple scales in the interest of democratic change. Specifically, we see Mamfakinch use the technological affordances of the digital to curate and circulate information outside the scope of established media institutions and the state, engaging in processes of translation that are both linguistic and conceptual in that they involve scaling up claims of local contentious politics using the language of human rights, and producing texts that challenge the ideological frameworks of various publics, creating points of encounter and contention. Mamfakinch moved back and forth across the local and the global, working with local activists, media outlets, NGOs, and supranational organizations to challenge official state discourse and narratives of the nation.

Mamfakinch taps into newly networked and increasingly worldly youth digital cultures rooted in blogging, social networking, and the consumption and remixing of global media commodities. In the case of Amina Filali, youth, in particular, used the digital to produce their own narratives, talk about relevant

¹³ Mamfakinch went on to participate in the "March of Free Women of Morocco" and publish more in-depth analysis of Filali's case, including an interview with AMDH's secretary Samira Kinani (Mülchi, 2012), and coproducing a film by Nadir Bouhmouch titled *475: When Marriage Becomes Punishment* (Bouhmouch et al., 2013).

sociopolitical issues, and assert claims aimed at the highest echelons of power. We see young women publicly address taboo topics such as rape and sexual harassment, speaking out about their own experiences and against norms of silence in ways that bear striking similarity to the #MeToo moment today. This manifests not only in serious discussions but also in transgressive forms of entertainment and poking fun directly at politicians and social norms inconsistent with individual liberties and human rights. What emerges from Mamfakinch's mediations of the Filali affair is a restructuring of interactions between publics and power, resulting in new modes of publicness that are both deeply local and transcend locality.

By acting as a platform for the mediation of these claims at a time when few Moroccan media outlets had a meaningful online presence, Mamfakinch played a pivotal role in establishing possibilities and practices for mediated activism and digital journalism that continue to be lived out by various online initiatives. Mamfakinch's flexible public processes mean that publics are increasingly self-aware of the symbiotic relationship between media, physical demonstrations, and online mobilizations for exerting domestic and transnational pressure for change. Mamfakinch in particular tapped into transnational activist-journalist-civil society networks to invoke a politics of shame that is especially effective in claims against an externally oriented economy like Morocco's. In the long-term aftermath of the Arab Spring, what is becoming clearer is the extent of the investment being made by states to reassert their gatekeeping power and extend it into the digital domain. Mamfakinch's demise in 2014 may be seen as an indication of success, yet every time a cause captures the public imagination, we see the reactivation of these processes of mediation and public formation rooted in Mamfakinch. Thus, what began as an attempt to turn the Arab Spring moment in Morocco into a viable opposition using media developed into a new mode of publicness defined by flexible publics and restructuring the norms of interaction between publics and power.

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