

## **Articulating spaces for citizenship:**

### **Performing the right to petition Moroccan municipalities**

#### **Abstract**

After Moroccans took the streets in 2011, the constitutional reform that sought to write a new page of Morocco's political history gave a prominent role to citizens' participation. It not only self-defined the kingdom as a 'participatory democracy' but it also included a series of specific innovations to foster citizens' engagement in its political processes. The right to petition figures amongst these innovations. After it gained a place in the 2011 Constitution (art. 15), further reforms in the legal framework institutionalised this right at the national and local levels. In a context where decision-making remains fundamentally top-down, this has represented a new opportunity for citizens to voice their demands to the government. This is especially true for the local level, where compliance with the legal framework is supposed to ensure that the petition will be discussed by the municipal council. Yet, the formal conditions to exercise this right (such as a significant number of signatures for citizens and official registration for civil society actors) are such that they likely limit the scope of citizens' rights-claiming practices. In addition, there are no guarantees that implementation of the object of the petition (such as the demand for a new road) will follow.

This thesis explores citizens' experiences with the right to petition Moroccan municipalities by asking the following question: why, how and to what effect is citizenship performed through the exercise of the right to petition in Moroccan municipalities? Creating new ways for citizens to engage their governments can incentivise participation, but participatory innovations may also reinforce uneven power balances and 'channel' citizens' grievances into manageable spaces. Going beyond a normative assessment of this right, this research examines the space created by the right to petition and the way in which citizens actually seize it. It focuses on citizens' capacity to navigate the formal boundaries of the right to petition in order to claim their rights. The notion of performative citizenship is central to this approach: far from understanding citizenship as a static relation, this research explores how individuals become citizens through rights-claiming practices. This does not imply neglecting the relevance of the regulatory framework. On the contrary, this study illustrates the interdependence of the performance of the right to petition and the space that frames it by unravelling the diverse trajectories of citizens' engagement.

This thesis builds on the results of extensive mixed-methods field research in Morocco. It includes the findings of past research on civil society's participation, 20 months of fieldwork (January–March 2020; August 2020–December 2021), multiple follow-up visits and ongoing contact with research participants. The data collected during this process includes quantitative information on the petitions presented to Moroccan municipalities and qualitative accounts of petitioners' experiences with this right, with local officials and with civil society actors working in this field.

After an introduction (Chapter 1) and a discussion of the methodology employed in this research (Chapter 2), this thesis grounds the right to petition in the academic literature, clarifies the normative boundaries of 'participatory democracy' and highlights the benefits of looking at the right to petition as an institutionalised participatory arena (Chapter 3). While the study recognises the limitations imposed by the legal framework, it also shows citizens' diverse goals and strategies involved in exercising this right. Furthermore, the thesis zooms in on the municipal level and shows the extent to which this right has been exercised at the local level (Chapter 4). It illustrates the initiatives presented and rights claimed through municipal petitions and discusses the visible and invisible barriers to exercising this right and the obstacles to its implementation. Next, the thesis takes a closer look at the implementation of petitions in Tangier to understand the contextual political dimension of citizens' participation (Chapter 5). By examining the conditions that give citizens a say in local governance, it shows how the dynamics of depoliticisation and (re)politicisation co-exist through the exercise of the right to petition. Finally, the thesis continues the discussion on petitions' political relevance by engaging with the civic spaces debates (Chapter 6). It stresses that the co-production of the space where state and society interact is embedded in negotiating the reciprocal roles of state and civil society, demonstrating that the space for participation can be seized to both challenge and consolidate a given consensus.

The main contribution of this research is to further refine our understanding of citizenship and the ways in which it may be performed. On top of demonstrating that citizens' performances can go well beyond what is prescribed in the legislative framework, situating petitions in the broader space for participation made it possible to show in which cases right-claiming practices influence local power balances. Crucially, the space for citizenship depends on actors' (citizens and local governments in particular) reciprocal understanding of their position and respective goals. As citizens exercise their agency, the reaction of other actors influences the space available by incentivising some behaviours and discouraging others, further influencing

citizens' rights-claiming practices. Ultimately, there is a balancing act between initial ambitions and the evolving understanding of the available space. This balancing act entails citizens' articulation of the space in which they exercise their citizenship.