

The Mostafa Terrab Scandal: Post-Truth and the Dilemma of the Privileged

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Rabat – For a few days last week, Mostafa Terrab, the stratospherically respected and decorated CEO of Morocco’s OCP, was the subject of a “national scandal” for all the wrong reasons.

A widely shared — and mordantly commented — video showed Maya, a famous Shikha (female performer), singing and performing suggestive dance moves as guests sang and cheered her on in an atmosphere of privileged insouciance. One of the guests appeared — to some viewers — to be none other than Terrab.

The fact that this happened in corona-time, when social distancing is the norm and any ostentatious display of privilege is frowned upon, did understandably not sit well with many Moroccans.

Some queried, with a dose of typical Moroccan sarcasm, how and why a highly respected public personality, long described as the ultimate paragon of virtue and self-respect, defied the country’s epidemiological distress to “shamelessly” enjoy himself with a socially corrupt entourage.

Presumption of guilt

The questions were mostly rhetorical, the thinly veiled sarcasm already making clear what answers were expected or acceptable. But still there came a number of answers, even more satirical and caustic than the questions.

“So, for those who have been wondering where our phosphate money goes, you now have your answer,” said one Facebook comment. Another, playing on the same analogy, chimed in: “If you want your part of the phosphate money, Maya has taken it all already.”

Details emerged later, however, that the man shown in the video was not Terrab.

Not only does a quick scrutiny show that the man's facial traits were not those of Terrab, but it did not actually take any particularly advanced technology skills to see that the man in question bore no resemblance whatsoever to the OCP boss. Who was it, then?

Between privacy and news

A local outlet subsequently identified the man in the video as Ali Ghannam, a former head of Al Ajial Holding, formerly known as the Morocco-Kuwait Development Consortium (CMKD). Ghannam, until recently, led the National Federation of Tourism (FNT).

The revelation helped to assuage passions, abruptly ending what was quickly becoming a “national scandal” centered around Mostafa Terrab.

For her part, Maya, the performer, sent out a 20-minute long diatribe, castigating what she described as the attitude of losers and do-nothings who fill their idle hours by endlessly speaking about others' private lives.

Maya insisted she was free to do as she wills in her free time and suggested that journalists find “more serious topics” to write about rather than put their noses in the private affairs of citizens going about their normal lives and harmlessly enjoying themselves.

As Deborah Kapchan suggests in her incisive study of Moroccan female performers' impact on “the social body,” Maya's video strikes a chord as an expression of defiant shamelessness primarily aimed at challenging and disrupting societal codes.

A female performer's “body is a socially designated site of shamelessness in that her social mask requires a refusal of deference rules and moral norms,” Kapchan writes. By this light, Maya can be understood to see her body as a venue of contestation and fierce determination to live as she sees fit.

But it was another story with Terrab, as evidenced by the fact that most of the angry comments focused on the supposed duplicity of a rich and self-entitled CEO.

With his storied success with OCP, his positive public image, and the series of national and international accolades he has amassed over the years, Mostafa Terrab, for better or worse, found himself wrapped in scandal and catapulted in the public eye. It is a life of intense external scrutiny, often blurring the lines between private and public selves.

Terrab's saving graces

Before this short-lived scandal, it was common to read obsequiously positive, almost mythologizing comments about Mostafa Terrab and his unprecedented transformation of OCP. Those who know the OCP boss have described him as the epitome of professionalism: Diligent, near-perfect at his work, and self-effaced.

When Terrab was appointed to lead OCP back in 2006, his mission was to rescue a sinking ship with an uncertain future, a marginal impact on the Moroccan economy, and a negligible presence on the global market.

Back then, OCP was mainly focused on the production and exportation of phosphoric acid, mainly used to make phosphate salts for fertilizers. And while the Moroccan company had a fair share of the global market for that product, Terrab came in with an agenda of rupture and complete re-centering of priorities. He wanted the company to be competitive in the production and exportation of a finished and increasingly coveted product: Fertilizers.

That bet paid off, as Terrab himself explained in a hearing before the Financial and Political Control Commission of the Moroccan House of Representatives on December 17 of last year.

Terrab pointed out to the commission that in his thirteen years at the helm of OCP, the once-sinking company has stabilized its coffers, become a vital contributor to the national purse, and established itself as a force to reckon with at the global level.

Its share of the global market for fertilizers jumped from 9 to 22%, while its annual production of the coveted market jumped from 3 million tonnes in 2006 to 12 million tonnes in 2019. OCP is now a leading producer of fertilizers and phosphate-based products, making it a go-to company for countries and big, industrial farmers the world over.

In the meantime, now an indispensable contributor to the national economy (from MAD 700 million or \$76 million per year in 2006 to 5 billion or \$542.9 million in 2019), the company has emerged as Morocco's most preferred employer.

Since 2016, when it launched its "OCP Africa" initiative, the company has also become one of Morocco's most effective foreign policy tools in Africa. OCP Africa's success, especially its "green revolution" initiative, is admired and highly demanded across the continent.

For most observers, Terrab's managerial revolution is the main ingredient of OCP's spectacular transformation. In his 2013 book about OCP's "impressive" managerial success story, Pascal Croset makes the point that Terrab's philosophy of "pragmatism and adaptability," coupled with his insistence on continued research and innovation, were key in the making of "an inspiring management lesson from the Global South."

All this — Mostafa Terrab's personal and professional successes, as well as his widely applauded "transformation" of OCP — might have played an integral part in saving him from terminal reputation damage after the scandal.

More significant, however, was Terrab's prevailing image among friends, colleagues, and acquaintances as a profoundly ethical, self-composed, and self-respecting character. It also helped that, in her long response video, Maya insisted, much to the chagrin of the initial video's strongest critics, that Terrab was not at the party.

Even at the culminating point of last week's short-lived scandal, a number of commenters, however marginal and inaudible, insisted on what was immediately obvious to them. As they saw it, even putting aside the blurry and questionable image shown in the footage, there was one blissfully simple explanation why the man in the video could not have been Terrab: The footage depicted a scene that is the exact antithesis of the Terrab they have known or worked with for decades.

Sensationalism as the war against successful people

For some, this left room for only one explanation. That, as journalist Hassan Alaoui argued, the scandal was the work of the "enemies" of Morocco whose endgame in character-shaming Mostafa Terrab was to show that they could manipulate and distort Moroccans' perception.

The point is eminently arguable. OCP has long been on the radar of those who, despite numerous UN resolutions and Morocco-EU deals to the contrary, continue to accuse Morocco of “occupation” and “illegal exploitation of local resources” in Western Sahara.

Alaoui’s suggestion is that, having failed in their diplomatic, official schemes against Morocco’s recent diplomatic breakthroughs in Africa and elsewhere, the country’s “enemies” may have decided it is more convenient to character-assassinate the poster child of Moroccan success and — even if briefly — achieve their initial aim.

But that the point is arguable doesn’t make it immediately receivable. If anything, in this era of post-truth and extremely compelling deepfakes, an amateurish video unable to convince even the least technology-savvy viewers may suggest other alternative readings regarding its motives.

It may have come from another place altogether: The ghastly banality of online-shaming. Or, more to the point, the theatrical malleability of facts to chastise and humble those perceived to be unfair and undeserving winners of privileges made possible by a dysfunctional social ladder. Or could it be a scheme sponsored by acquaintances who would like to have Terrab’s influential position at OCP?

In any case, according to a recent survey by the Cato Institute, most young Americans resent the rich and powerful, claiming they are untrustworthy and do not deserve their privileges. This can confidently be extrapolated beyond America.

In that sense, our “society of spectacle,” to borrow French philosopher Guy Debord’s prescient description of our era, can be said to put everyone, especially the successful and powerful who until now set, unopposed, the agenda of public discourse, one breath away from online cancellation and character assassination.

While different in their level of acrimony and innuendo, last week’s reputation-sapping comments against Terrab had one common denominator: They all came across as a justified rage or righteous resentment against a rich, visible, and highly regarded public personality.

In other words, it seems fleetingly satisfactory and fashionable to rail against the rich and powerful. And so, even as the video’s “Terrab” showed no striking resemblance to the OCP CEO, those who felt outraged by the tenuous resemblance saw no point in considering whether the video was genuine or not.

Seen in that light, the Mostafa Terrab scandal was mostly the tale of today's armchair prosecutors eager to pronounce morality sentences, to passionately declare "guilty as charged" anyone seen in a decontextualized — and oftentimes fake — footage doing something deemed morally reprehensible.

The sentence is even heavier when the accused is seen as a representative of the morally atrophied and self-entitled financial, intellectual, or political elite. In such cases, the performative trial soon morphs into a special display of bitterness and rancor against the supposedly inherent and inhumane greed and selfishness of rich, successful people. For better or worse, the rich, an increasingly "hated minority," are widely believed to embody moral decay and social decrepitude.

For those in this world of armchair prosecution, which is also a cesspit of disinformation and online-mobbing and provable falsehoods, reputation has become a battlefield. In this singular court where self-appointed decency prosecutors find elated contentment in creating and participating in a toxic saga of insults and public shaming, there is no interest in gathering factual evidence.

When presented with a case, belief or disbelief is no longer suspended. Instead, it is mobilized and weaponized to serve convenient truths and evidence, fabricated or not. The whole thing is, essentially, about the triumph of the presumption of guilt.

All that matters is "exposing" the systemic hypocrisy of the other (and it helps if that "other" is perceived as unfairly "privileged" and self-entitled), regardless of whether the accusations are true or just politically — or ideologically — motivated.

Banal acrimony and the post-truth appeal

Herein lies the triumph of the post-truth mentality: Even if we know today that a video or picture can be engineered to make us believe in lies or lure us into supporting different sides of an ideological or political rivalry, we are happy, if subconsciously, to play along.

As such, a video, however fleetingly accurate, often suffices to make us pontificate about things and people about whom we know very little, or nothing. From the relative comfort and safety of our rooms and offices, our cellphone and computer screens have become launching pads of morality assaults. On social media, especially Twitter, most cell phones now operate as combat drones relentlessly searching for the next target to "cancel" or socially annihilate.

Engulfed in our illusions of truth and certainties, or mired in the era's astounding absence of perspective and nuance, we are more than willing to give in to the charming appeal of "telling truth to power." The impulse is understandable, even justifiable — until it is not. Railing against hypocrisy is good. Railing against the powerful feels good.

But what if, as happened in the Mostafa Terrab "scandal," what we thought happened did not happen at all? Nothing. Or rather, nothing as remotely noticeable as the vociferous passions of the sheer banality with which the wrongly accused was publicly shamed and denigrated.

More fundamentally, the emergence of accurate, redeeming details may force a few people into a hasty retreat. Some may tweet or post heartfelt non-apologies, claiming — understandably — that they did not know that their principal incriminating evidence was "fake news."

In most cases, however, the large number of people who vociferously participated in the public shaming ritual will silently go back to their normal lives, leaving the wrongly accused and shamed to their own agony. They lay low without their usual, initial explosive fanfare, showing little remorse while waiting for the next "hypocrite," privileged or not, to fall prey to the evangelical fervor of their morality tribunal. As if nothing happened.

The sad truth, as a group of MIT researchers recently found, is that "falsehood diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, in all categories of information, and in many cases by an order of magnitude." There is a beauty to all this: the powerful are now more than ever scrutinized and exposed when they abuse their privileges or engage in any other reprehensible dealings.

Indeed, there is something beautiful and admirable about the internet as a social equalizer, the ultimate destroyer of the sea of presumptuousness and impunity in which most rich and powerful people have lived for decades.

But there are many instances, like the faux Mostafa Terrab scandal, where the noble ideal of social equality and "telling truth to power" becomes a score-settling contest and an enabler of inconsiderate public shaming. This, then, is at once the beauty and horror of our post-truth era: We (at least most of us) are all post-truthers now, and no one is safe from the next mob, or the next morality or thought police, or the next character-assassination brigade. We are all "Big Brother" now.