

Exclusive

On the Targuist Sniper's trail

Since July, the infamous “Targuist Sniper” makes Hosni Benslimane’s men tremble, catching corrupt officers on film. TelQuel found the “Kannass”, which is really an impeccably organised commando of “Robins of the Web”.

Wedged on a mountain slope between Al Hoceima and Ketama, Targuist is a typical Moroccan town. Guests are rare here. Only large taxis can take you on a trip through twisting routes and uneven paths without fear of the awesome ravines bordering them.

Once there, you find a ghost town, its 12'000 population seemingly vanished from the narrow streets. The people of Targuist live mainly on agriculture, and not just any agriculture, with cannabis being virtually the only plant that can grow on the rocky soil. Even the freshly painted (for the occasion of a royal visit) sidewalks cannot conceal the real look of the town. Ruined Spanish colonial buildings stand next to newer towerblocks scattered randomly by the valley's walls. Excluding a few cafés, there are no other leisure facilities: no cinema, no cultural centres, no libraries. Even where once was the only football field, now is a row of buildings. In Targuist, more than anywhere else, ‘the youth have only one desire – to find a job in Tetouan and fill the benches of candidates for illegal immigration’ – says with regret Hassan Khemlich, one of the militant associates. ‘Targuist is on its own, it is the end of the so-called “useless Morocco”, that nobody cares about’.

Smile, you're being filmed!

But early July, things have changed. A footage of royal police officers caught red-handed on bribery sneaked out of Targuist apathy and, a little bit by the way, anonymity. Published on Youtube.com¹, the recording had been made by an unknown internet user who likes to be called “the Targuist Sniper” (*Kannass Targuist* in Arab). From a mountain overlooking the barricade erected by the police at an exit from the city, the image hunter, armed only with a digital camera, takes his aim on police officers performing their, apparently usual, ritual of racketeering. Smugglers and other *kbataffa* (literally, “thieves of places”, an expression designating illegal transporters), which constitute the largest part of their “clientelle”, seem to be equally committed. They have no problems whatsoever getting a pass for twenty dirhams. The video quickly became the number one for the regular visitors on the site. 350'000 people watch the footage during the first week. It is an audience of extraordinary magnitude, a real record for a movie “made in Morocco”.

In the following weeks, the Sniper resurfaces posting, in regular intervals a second, a third and a fourth video showing indefatigably police officers in *flagrante delicto* of corruption. The only thing that changes, is the growing quality of the recordings. Footages with no commentary whatsoever gradually yield to ever more technically complex spots. Another important new feature: a caption marking names and ranks of the corrupt officers.

Relayed by the internet users, Sniper's footage crosses the Web like a fuse, before blowing up in bold fonts in both national and international press. The anonymous celebrity is granted elaborate articles in *Le Monde* and *Liberation*. Better still, fragments of clips are transmitted by satellite television stations such as LCI or Al Jazeera. During that time, Moroccan national TV stations, as is usual in any politically incorrect situation, opted for remaining silent.

The Police HQ, on the other hand, react swiftly. The nine officers seen in the footage are brought to justice (the trial has not yet finished, but according to several local sources, the suspects have been arrested), while the local police chief and his second in command are moved hastily to another station. Even though officially their departure was planned long before, it is difficult to consider these reshuffles as a simple calendary coincidence.

Following the scandal, the anti-corruption units (special division tasked with pinning down bent officers in the royal police) are more active than ever. According to an informant in the police, who prefers to remain anonymous, 'these squads were ordered to be firm. It's all about making examples in an attempt to save your face in front of the scandalised public'. Touched to the core, united officers prepare their counter-attack.

The chase for the man starts, aiming first the administrators of a Targuist internet forum. Targuistcite.com was created early 2007 and is dedicated to discussing everyday problems of the city. Gossip and rumours from the souk, everyday life anecdotes, all is featured on these forums. But the subjects that attract the most attention from the regular forum goers and guests are the stumbles of the local authority. A deputy frauded some funds? It's a sure front page news on the forums. A policeman was bent? He is bound to be slandered in one of the forum posts. Number one prize should certainly go to the forumgoer who posted this incendiary text: 'Two completely drunk officers rolled in the middle of the night into a notorious drug smuggler's house to make him spill the beans. Although they wanted 450'000 dirhams from him, he managed to negotiate it down to 250'000'. A fable or a revelatory information from an amateur journalist? One thing is certain, the internauts are really eager to communicate, protected by the anonymity of the Internet. And apparently, they are going even further than that. Late June, the "Kannass" posts on the forum his or her first video. It doesn't last long. After a strong reaction from the police, the compromising material is quickly removed. The webmaster leaves the following explanation: 'We are sorry for putting this footage on the forum, which may have offended the families of the officers'.

Pursuits, menaces, abductions

But for the police, damage has been done and no explanations from the webmaster can repair it. Mustapha, Karim and Samiraⁱⁱ, three of the forum moderators, are being stalked. 'They called us on the phone and approached in person', explains one of the three. 'But we know nothing about the one who the police are looking for. They only make us pay for the fact that we were administering a Targuist-dedicated Internet forum, where the local authorities weren't very appreciated'. Since no written summoning was delivered, the trio decided not to reply to the officers' questions. 'They did well', says Abderrahmane Benameur, attorney and a militant of the AMDH (Moroccan association of Human Rights) who knows the law like the back of his hand. 'In order to summon a citizen, the police must have a written order from the judge, unless the suspect is caught red-handed. In this particular case, they had no justification at all – filming an officer in the middle of an act of corruption is not a crime – on the contrary, it is a civic act, encouraged by the law!'

The police, who are on red alert (and possibly completely panicked) do not pore on such considerations. Instead, according to many witnesses, they abduct Ahmed, a thirty year old Targuist citizen, and the Targuistcite forum goer, returning from the evening prayer. 'They've taken me to the police station. Once there, they could do whatever they wanted. They first beat me up, but as I wouldn't give in, they threatened me with rape. They wanted me to sign an admission that I attacked them during the arrest, probably to have a legal basis for charging me', he says. But the young man resists and finally understands the reason for this unorthodox

interpellation. ‘They thought I was the infamous Targuist “Kannass”. Suddenly, during an interrogation, they suggested that I filmed some police officers racketeering. After two nights at the station, they made me sign false testimony’.

The Targuist commando

‘They are completely wrong. If they think, they got hold of the Targuist Sniper, they’re barking up the wrong tree’, told us one that should rather be called a Targuist commando rather than the Sniper. We met them at a place and circumstances that we shall not reveal in order not to compromise their security. A good dozen of the group members, most of whom are students around 25 years old, have been acting in shadows for six months now. They claim to have an abundance of material compromising Hosni Benslimane’s men. Their leitmotif – fighting against corruption, but also taking over the place left by withdrawing political parties. Let us illustrate this with the words of one of the group members: ‘A regular policeman starts his patrols in sandals. After just a few months, he moves into a beautiful villa. For the first time in Morocco’s history, we have undeniable evidence of their corruption’.

The tasks in the group are divided by the members’ skills. ‘There are several of us to film’, says one of the “snipers”, ‘A digital camera, a few well-done close-ups and the job’s done. Then, the film is cut by an experienced tech and someone further else is tasked with its dissemination and possible contacts with the outside world, namely the press. For the security’s sake, we don’t know all of the others. We build on the methods used by political dissidents from the past, who were forced to remain underground, but who were well-organised’.

Indeed, their organisation is so effective, they can actually afford to pick their targets. First, they act in space, surveying the most frequented passages (where the police activity is the largest), then in time. ‘We strike at the moment that we deem best’, explains one of the cameramen-sentinels. ‘So when we learnt that the king was going to visit the region, we decided to put our first footage online’. In it, the group addresses the monarch directly, asking ‘the young and brave king to save Targuist from the corruption of certain officials’. Another attack comes on September 7, the day of legislative elections, when the commando posts their fourth video.

Robins of the Web

On publishing each new video, local population crowds Internet cafés to see the new trophies of the “Kannass”. But the Targuists are divided, as not all of them approve of the group’s activity. Some are relieved that they no longer have to cross the policemen on their way. Others are openly dissatisfied. ‘Corruption is omnipresent in Morocco. By disseminating these videos, the Sniper made bad publicity for the city’, says one of the citizens. A driver, a *khattaf*, used to working in the shades of the law, shares the same opinion: ‘We pay the policemen every once in a while, like everywhere else. But we are the only means of transport for the villagers who live in the region. Because of the footage, the police are making our work difficult...’.

Typical? No doubt. ‘Everybody is confused. People don’t know if they should applaud the Internet heroes, or condemn them in fear of possible reprisal. It would be convenient for the authorities to have a part of the society against the Snipers’, remarked another citizen.

Because nobody is a prophet in their own country, it is on the Internet that the Sniper found most support. ‘Way to go, guys! You are among the people who form the public opinion in Morocco. I’m so proud of you! They’ve already muzzled the press, and now they want to muzzle you too. Take care! When can we expect to see videos from the police stations?’, asks one of the

surfers, enthusiasm all over. Another Web adept adds an arithmetic analysis: ‘38 cars, 10 dirhams each. In ten minutes, the two police officers pocket 380 dirhams, being 38 dirhams a minute. Hard to find a better paid job’.

Encouraged by the society, the Robins of the Web are determined to continue their denunciation oeuvre: ‘We didn’t expect it to become such a fuss. But we encourage others to fight corruption the same way as we do’. Unintentionally, the Snipers became an example to follow. Indeed, a little bit everywhere in the kingdom, the hunt for corrupt officials is open. Authors are different, but their modus operandi remains the same.

Early September, somebody posted a video of bent Auxiliary Force members in Casablanca. The same in Nador, only this time the corrupt ones are customs officers. The irony of this particular video, is that it is dedicated to the Targuist Sniper.

At last, the Moroccan television!

The case resurfaces October 2. Channel 2, until now completely silent about the events, announces that the officers featured in the videos had been arrested. A very official press agency, the MAP, follows their path and publishes a memo explaining that ‘the officers and the corruptors suspected in the Targuist affair are subject to a legal procedure and were brought to justice’. The source of this information is no other than... the royal police. The agency added that ‘the authors of the recordings have been identified and invited to act as witnesses in the case’. The message is clear: the authorities will not punish the authors of the footage. For the moment, however, the persons in question prefer to decline the invitation: ‘If they know who we are, let them summon us. We will not voluntarily reveal our identities to end up like Jalti and Adibⁱⁱⁱ. We shall continue our fight against corruption in anonymity’. The member of the commando adds with a vicious smile: “Anyway, the fifth video is about to be broadcast...”

ⁱ - A famous website enabling users to share video clips

ⁱⁱ - The names of certain people have been changed on their request, for the sake of their security

ⁱⁱⁱ - Two military men who denounced cases of corruption in the armed forces and were later condemned by the military court.