

Mourad Gartoumi. Flagrant embezzlement at Casablanca wholesale market. Bayane Al-Yaoume.

Hassan Arabi. Published in Bayane Al-Yaoume, 20/10/2010.

1 billion dirhams embezzled between April 2002 and March 2003 to say nothing of other years!
Wholesale market transformed into black box for financing electoral campaigns.

The late Driss Basri still protects his nephew who managed the market between 1989 and 1999. Meanwhile, the name of trader Mourad Gartoumi has been associated with the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Casablanca for more than a decade. He began trading agricultural products as a broker before taking over operation of a commercial store within the market, selling potatoes and hiring out plastic boxes to traders and farmers. However, the year 2005 represents a turning point in his relationship with the market after Casablanca City Council set out to deprive him of these operations, taking revenge against him for his earlier discovery of widespread and diverse embezzlement of the market's finances. This became a subject of popular debate in the market, resulting in the opening of the first investigation into this activity by the Special Court of Justice in Rabat, although this was later cancelled. Mourad Gartoumi had filed a complaint regarding the embezzlement to certain official authorities – but the haemorrhaging of embezzled funds from the market did not stop. So the trader Mourad Gartoumi sent new complaints regarding the matter to numerous authorities – among them the Minister of Interior and the Public Prosecutor at the Casablanca Court of Appeal – supplying them with irrefutable data and documents to prove that a number of organised crimes had been perpetrated by, in his words, “genuine criminals who became filthy rich in record time.” This resulted in the opening of an investigation into the matter which has so far led to the prosecution of nineteen defendants by the Public Prosecution at Casablanca Appeal Court, among them eight who have been denied bail while the rest are also still under investigation by the Magistrate. The first complaint has meanwhile been referred to Casablanca Appeal Court following cancellation by the Special Court of Justice. This matter, which remains current at the Court, involves the prosecution of twenty-six defendants freed on bail. In this interview with Bayane Al-Yaoume the trader Mourad Gartoumi – filer of all of the complaints regarding the wholesale market which, prior to investigations commencing in the year 2009, was ranked as the second largest source of revenue for the City Council after the Maison des Services – reveals examples of embezzlement at the market. He names the individuals who are benefiting from it, gives vivid illustrations of the manipulation of prices of fruit and vegetables and talks about issues involving market agents, malpractice in deals and suspect sales.

***First of all, what is your relationship with the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Casablanca?**

- My relationship with this market started in the early nineteen nineties when I worked as a broker selling and buying agricultural products, before later working in purchasing agricultural crops from farmers in the area of Aulad Abdullah in Taroudant Province. In fact, I sometimes undertook agricultural activities such as planting vegetables and waiting for the crops before selling them on at the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Casablanca.

Early in the year 2002 I acquired a licence to operate a commercial store in wing 10/12 inside the wholesale market. I sell potatoes there, and also rent out plastic boxes to traders and farmers. After my profits grew the number of people competing with me increased and the management of the market also began to harass me, particularly after I discovered numerous examples of malpractice related to the weighbridge tickets which record the entry of fruit and vegetable lorries into the market. Soon everyone at the market was talking about me.

***What form did this harassment take?**

- I actually faced numerous forms of harassment by the management of the market and their security guards. They tried to fabricate accusations against me to have me thrown into prison. The Director of Casablanca Municipal Council, Mohammed Sajed, prevented me from operating the commercial store

I had been renting within the market, although I was regularly fulfilling the rental requirements. That happened in the year 2005.

***Does this issue involve embezzlement of the market's finances?**

- Of course, this matter involves embezzlement of numerous forms, and many people are benefiting from the proceeds, among them officials and elected representatives. For example, there are elected representatives who have long been known to all, who overnight have suddenly turned into real estate owners, project developers and company shareholders by exploiting deals as elected officials. In fact, they have even financed their electoral campaigns using funds embezzled from the market.

Generally speaking, theft has been a common denominator of all of the market's managers and their deputies for over a quarter of a century. The period from 1989 to 1999 when Youssef Basri – nephew of the former Minister of Interior Driss Basri – was manager of the market, stands out as one of the worst periods in the wholesale market's history in terms of the major looting of the market's finances. This is particularly the case as the management of the market at that time (when the market's current manager Mohammed Sabki held the position of deputy manager) enjoyed the protection of former Minister of Interior Driss Basri and the then Director of the Municipality Abdelmoughit Sleimani.

***How is this embezzlement carried out?**

- There are numerous forms of embezzlement. I will give you a few examples of this malpractice, provided that I can then return to discussion of the matter of agents and the manifestations of wastage of public money. If we take tomatoes as an example, the market's management breaks tomatoes down into various types, such as Agadir tomatoes, Oualidia tomatoes, and Dichi and Mohammedia tomatoes, and different duties are imposed for each of these types. Instead of setting one rate for the level of duties imposed on all kinds of tomatoes, the manager extorts farmers and traders by raising or lowering these duties, claiming that these tomatoes are different. This applies equally to other types of fruit and vegetables.

There is also the process of fraudulently declaring loads. Generally speaking, lorry loads of both fruit and vegetables are recorded inaccurately, or lorries are declared to be carrying potatoes instead of bananas, for example.

***Can you give us some examples of the malpractice you discovered relating to weighbridge tickets?**

- Of course. I have hundreds of weighbridge tickets which clearly demonstrate this malpractice, among them this one (he hands a copy of the ticket to Bayane Al-Yaoume) bearing number 4516013 relating to the entry of a lorry of type Mitsubishi, registration number 38-A-3019, on 2 October 2008. The lorry was carrying around 5205 kg of tomatoes – in wooden boxes – the price of which is set at the market as 1.10 dirhams per kilogram. Note that tomatoes are never placed in wooden boxes, but rather in plastic boxes. If we perform a calculation in which the 5205 kg load of tomatoes is divided by the number of boxes – specified as 735 – we arrive at an answer of 7 kg per box. This result is illogical as the true load of each wooden box must be at least 30 kg. Similarly, the weight of the lorry is exaggerated to minimise the apparent size of the load, leading to a reduction in the duties payable by the owner of the goods. This process, which is repeated time and again, benefits the owner of the goods as he pays lower duties in return for paying a commission to an official, who may be either an assistant or a civil servant. These processes are common knowledge and no one can deny them. The facts speak for themselves. There are hundreds of other weighbridge tickets containing obvious embezzlement.

***What about the issue of the stall agents?**

- Firstly, from the legal perspective, according to Section 5 of the Minister of Interior's 1962 Decision, wholesale market agents are appointed for a period of three years by means of competition, after which the agency can be extended or renewed by decision of the Minister of Interior. Yet the current market agents were appointed in the year 1986, and in some cases agents have passed away and their agencies have been transferred to their heirs without regard for the applicable law.

Similarly, these agents who should receive 1% in return for the services they provide to the trader do not respect this percentage, but instead impose another rate. In addition, the Municipality previously

allocated a number of stores as temporary offices for all of the agents, but they rented them to other people who in turn use them to rent out wooden boxes to bidders. Yet no one knows the fate of the revenue from these stores.

***How much do you estimate the revenue from these stores to be?**

- There are twenty stores with a rental revenue estimated at 104 million a year. The operators of these stores have been paying rental duties for a quarter of a century but these end up in the pockets of the manager.

***But Casablanca City Council sent warnings to all of the agents to pay their debts.**

- Where was Casablanca Council in previous years? What the Mayor of Casablanca has done is a desperate attempt. Responsibility for a number of transgressions and violations at the market – in particular the issue of the suspect sales – lies with him and a group of Council members, among them parliamentarians, arrondissement directors and members of the Municipality.

***Tell us about these sales?**

- The wholesale market has witnessed a number of sales which can be described as suspect. These can be outlined as follows:

A toilet provided for women in wing 7 was transformed into Riyad El-Souq café, operated by the individual Farid Hassan Idris, and another men's toilet in wing 8 became Chichaoua café operated by the individual Abdulhaq Safrioui. A further toilet in wing 20 was also transformed into a café located in the covered hall, currently operated by the individual known as El-Droukri – also named Hassan – who operates a number of toilets, a café in the covered hall and a shop in the market. A further group of individuals have licences to operate commercial stores, among them the individual Abdulrahim Naim who has obtained licences for the operation of three stores through the director of Sbata arrondissement. Added to these cafés are other stores and facilities such as restaurants, barbers shops or telephone booths. The serious issue is that if you examine Casablanca City Council's administrative account for the year 2008 you will see that the revenues relating to the operation of these toilets are assessed at zero dirhams, yet the operators of these toilets were paying rental duties and received receipts from the director of the duties department at the wholesale market.

***Who do you think is responsible for all of these transgressions?**

- There are many individuals who bear responsibility for these violations, foremost among them the current manager of the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in his capacity as the person primarily responsible for setting the prices of fruit and vegetables and monitoring weighbridge tickets, and because he has disguised all of the aforementioned violations. The director of the market's duties department and his deputies, the market's general coordinator, the watchtower director and his deputies, and other individuals engaged in brokerage between the management of the market and the traders are all responsible, in addition to others.

***What about the wastage of public money?**

- Examples of the wastage of public money are numerous – I will relate just a few of them. Firstly, there is talk that a private company named Sherlock has been commissioned with cleaning the toilets. However, this company is fictitious and has no effect in reality. Also, a stall was sold outside of the covered hall in front of wing 20, and another close to the original exit door of the market. Both stalls were constructed illegally by the manager of the market. Unnecessary new electricity pylons were also pointlessly constructed next to existing ones, which is a waste of public money.

Similarly, the administrative account of the year 2005 states that five wells were drilled to extract ground water, while in reality it is evident that these wells have no effect. This is to say nothing of the allocation of a sum approaching a billion centimes for the roofing of Agadir market located in the open area of the fruit and vegetable market – this huge sum exceeds the true value of the works and the installation of this roof.

In 2009 a set of electronic surveillance cameras were installed following a public deal, particularly in sensitive areas inside the market – a project that cost the Council's budget around 54 million

centimes. These were later destroyed in the office of the market's manager, Mohammed Sabki, who claimed that fire had broken out in his office on 17 March 2009.

On the subject of deals, a public deal was formed with a company for the purchase of computers for a sum of around a billion centimes. These computers were connected by means of an information network linking the IT department with the watchtower, the weighbridge, the management of the market and the duties department. However, all of these computers and the entire network have suffered complete paralysis as a result of unexplained faults.

***Your name has been linked to the submission of a number of complaints to numerous authorities regarding this malpractice at the market.**

- I made the first of my complaints in 2002 to the current Minister of Interior, who at the time occupied the position of Director of Criminal Affairs and Amnesty. It related to the disappearance at that time of significant monetary sums from seven stalls.

***What was the outcome of this complaint?**

- It was referred to the Special Court of Justice. The Judicial Police in Sidi Othmane were commissioned with the matter and I was interviewed regarding the complaint. This was followed by the Magistrate's arrest of the then director of the duties department, Aziz Touilila, and a civil servant, while the seven agents of the wholesale market were released. After cancellation by the Special Court of Justice the matter was referred to the Court of Appeal in Casablanca. After several years of waiting this Court again decided not to prosecute the duties department director, Aziz Touilila, sufficing with prosecuting twenty-six defendants freed on bail, in most cases for the offence of embezzlement of public funds placed in their possession by virtue of their position, as stipulated in and punishable under Section 241 of the Criminal Code. Meanwhile the current director of Sbata arrondissement was prosecuted for the crime of corruption and the measures of judicial monitoring were continued against a number of defendants. The arrest warrant issued against Ahmed Ben Talib and Mounar Hicham also remained effective. This matter remains current at the First Instance Criminal Chamber, as a further session has been scheduled for consideration of the case on the 4th of November. The scale of the funds embezzled in a single year at the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Casablanca is estimated at a billion dirhams during the period from April 2002 to March 2003, to say nothing of the preceding and subsequent periods. These are the cases of embezzlement on which the Magistrate based the prosecution of these defendants.

***Were you interviewed regarding this matter after its referral to Casablanca Appeal Court?**

- I was not officially interviewed by the Magistrate. The serious issue here is the fact that the minute in which my statement was recorded when I was interviewed by the Judicial Police in Sidi Othmane in 2002 disappeared under mysterious circumstances. I presented a complaint about this subject to the Public Prosecutor of Casablanca Appeal Court but I have not yet received a response regarding this matter.

***Recently, last August, you presented another complaint regarding continued violations at the same market to the Public Prosecution at Casablanca Appeal Court?**

- Yes, I presented this complaint as a result of which the national team of the Judicial Police arrested eight individuals from the aforementioned market, among them two assistants at the watchtower and weighbridge and a trader, after they made an unannounced visit to the market.

***Were you also interviewed?**

- I was interviewed for several hours during which I presented the members of the Judicial Police with a range of details, and at the same time supplied them with copies of weighbridge tickets relating to all of the violations and transgressions.

***You stated recently that you will abandon your complaints if no senior officials are investigated regarding this embezzlement. Who do you mean exactly?**

- I mean the current manager of the market, who will be heard by the Magistrate in the coming days, and the current director of the market, among others. I have already arranged an open sit-in at the

market and a hunger strike, following the failure to prosecute a group of senior directors regarding this matter.

***Where will this matter lead in the end, in your view?**

- I have great confidence in our judiciary to restore matters to their proper place by returning the embezzled money and stopping the haemorrhage of embezzled funds experienced by the market over more than a quarter of a century. This can be done by prosecuting all of those involved in this matter, and not making do with arresting and prosecuting civil servants and assistants who were only following the bosses' instructions.