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World Report 2025 - Morocco and Western Sahara

Moroccan authorities continued their crackdown on dissent and security forces forcibly dispersed [peaceful protests](#). King Mohammed VI pardoned nearly [5,000](#) cannabis farmers and [708 people](#) who had been detained for other crimes, but left out activists from the [Hirak movement](#) serving up to 20 years in prison for protesting living conditions. To commemorate 25 years on the throne, the king also pardoned nearly [2,500 detainees](#) in July, including three outspoken critics of government policy.

Freedom of Speech

On November 11, a court in Rabat sentenced a journalist, Hamid Mahdaoui, to 18 months in prison for alleged defamation against the justice minister and fined him 1.5 million Moroccan dirhams (approximately US\$150,000).

On October 30, Moroccan police arrested prominent human rights and democracy activist Fouad Abdelmoumni and released him provisionally the same day. On November 1, a Casablanca court charged him with “insulting organized bodies [institutions], publishing false allegations, and reporting an imaginary crime that he knows did not occur.” As of December 11, Abdelmoumni was awaiting trial.

Journalists Omar Radi, Soulaïman Raïssouni, and Taoufik Bouachrine were released from prison in July alongside 2,500 others, after being granted a [royal amnesty](#) by the king. All three had been [arrested, tried, or imprisoned on questionable charges of sexual misconduct](#), a tactic used by authorities in recent years to discredit dissidents.

Authorities continued their crackdown on dissent. In March, they arrested blogger Youssef El Hireche for a Facebook post deemed insulting to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ruler, and in May, the Qunaitra First Instance Court, [sentenced](#) him to 18 months in prison for Facebook posts “[i]nsulting a public official, insulting organized bodies, and distributing confidential information without the owner’s consent.”

In March, authorities arrested [blogger](#) Abderrahman Zankad, who is affiliated with an Islamist party, over Facebook posts critical of Morocco’s decision to “normalize” relations with Israel. He was subsequently [sentenced to five years](#) in prison for insulting the king, deemed an “insult to a constitutional institution and incitement.”

In a similar case, an appeals court in November 2023 [upheld](#) the sentencing of blogger Said Boukioud for “insulting the king,” in Facebook posts in 2020 in which he criticized Morocco’s normalization agreement with Israel. The court reduced the sentence from five to three years.

Freedom of Assembly

Security forces forcibly dispersed [peaceful protests](#). This included the use of force against a demonstration organized by disability rights groups outside parliament in May and protests organized by healthcare workers in July.

A group of 40 Hirak protesters, including leaders Nasser Zefzafi and Nabil Ahamjik, [remained imprisoned](#), serving decades-long sentences after an appeals court [upheld](#) their convictions in 2019, despite credible allegations of confessions obtained under torture.

Penal Code

The penal code criminalizes several aspects of private life. Abortion is [criminalized](#) with a penalty of up to two years in prison and five years for abortion providers. Exceptions under Article 453 apply only when the mother's health is at risk. The justice minister in 2021 withdrew from parliamentary review a proposed draft [amendment](#) which would have legalized abortion in cases of rape, incest, "mental illness of the mother," and "foetal impairment."

Sex outside of marriage is [punishable](#) by at least one year of imprisonment according to Article 490, and up to two years for adultery under Article 491. Same-sex relations are criminalized with up to three years in prison under Article 489.

Women's and Girl's Rights

The 2004 Family Code [provides](#) that a child's father is the default legal representative, even if the mother has responsibility for the child after a divorce. Women and girls inherit half of what their male relatives receive. Judges can grant "exemptions" to the minimum age of 18 for marriage, and families can request approval for girls as young as 15 to marry. Marital rape is not explicitly criminalized, and those who report rape outside of marriage risk being prosecuted for engaging in illegal sexual intercourse.

A [2018 law on violence against women](#) criminalized some forms of domestic violence and established prevention and protection measures. However, it also created barriers for survivors to access protections, failed to delineate the duty of care for police, prosecutors, and investigative judges, and did not allocate funding for women's shelters.

Migrants and Refugees

In September, Moroccan security forces [blocked](#) thousands of Moroccans and other African nationals from crossing into the Spanish border town of Ceuta, following mass mobilization on social media platforms encouraging people to leave due to the deteriorating economic situation. Moroccan authorities [arrested](#) 152 people after the incident, whom they accused of rallying people to attempt the mass migration.

As of August, there were almost 18,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Morocco [registered](#) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Morocco's parliament has yet to approve a 2013 draft law on the right to asylum. A 2003 [migration law](#) that criminalizes irregular entry into the country without providing exceptions for refugees and asylum seekers remains in effect.

The European Union [continued to cooperate](#) with Morocco on [migration control](#) despite human rights concerns.

Western Sahara

In July, France [recognized](#) Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, a break with past policies and a shift in international acceptance of the 2007 Moroccan [autonomy proposal](#), which would grant Morocco control over Western Sahara's national security and foreign affairs. France joined 37 other nations, four years after former president Donald Trump proclaimed US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for the country's establishment of full diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. Algeria, a steadfast supporter of [Saharawi independence](#), withdrew its ambassador from France in protest, stating that the measure

“flouts international legality” and “takes up the cause of the denial of the Saharawi people's right to self-determination.”

Most of Western Sahara has been under Moroccan control since 1975. In 1991, both Morocco and the Polisario Front, a liberation movement that seeks self-determination for Western Sahara, agreed to a UN-brokered ceasefire in anticipation of a referendum on self-determination, yet Morocco has rejected holding a vote on self-determination that would include independence as an option.

In 2020, the Algeria-based Polisario Front [announced](#) an end to the ceasefire with Morocco and resumed its armed struggle. In May, it attempted to [attack](#) the Morocco-controlled city of Smara, but rockets fell short and caused no damage.

The UN Secretary-General, in his July [report](#) on Western Sahara, denounced Morocco's failure to give the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) access to visit Western Sahara since 2015. He said OHCHR “continued to receive allegations relating to human rights violations, including intimidation, surveillance and discrimination against Sahrawi individuals particularly when advocating for self-determination.” Citing consistent concerns raised by the UN Secretary-General and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, a cross-regional group of countries appealed for independent monitoring and reporting on the human rights situation in Western Sahara.

The European Court of Justice in October [confirmed](#) the annulment of association agreements between the European Union and Morocco insofar as they include Western Sahara. This was in response to the appeals brought by the European Commission and Council against the court's 2021 ruling that Western Sahara is a distinct entity from Morocco, and the consent of its people is needed for agreements to apply to that territory. The ruling cancels trade deals that allowed Morocco to export fish and farm products to the EU from the Western Sahara region considering it in breach of their “right to self-determination.”

Nineteen Sahrawi men remained in prison after they were [convicted](#), in unfair trials in 2013 and 2017, of killing 11 Moroccan security force members in 2010, amid allegations of forced confessions and torture.

As of March, there were [173,600](#) Sahrawi refugees living in five camps near the southwestern Algerian town of Tindouf.