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Attacks on the Press 2010 - Morocco

Top Developments

- Government pressures advertisers, uses courts to punish critical media.
- Authorities obstruct Spanish and other foreign reporters in Western Sahara.

Key Statistic

- **2:** Leading independent weeklies that closed under government pressure. A daily facing harassment moved online.

The government continued using the judiciary to settle scores with critical journalists and pressuring private advertisers to avoid probing publications, two hallmarks of its antagonistic approach to independent and opposition media. The tactics forced two leading independent weeklies to close and a critical daily newspaper to move online.

The closing of *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* in January ended a long struggle between the government of King Mohammed VI and the provocative newsweekly, one that traces the arc of press freedom and repression in Morocco since the late 1990s. When its first iteration emerged in 1997, in the last years of the autocratic King Hassan II, *Le Journal* was seen as evidence of a new political openness. The demise of the newsweekly, after several years of official harassment and court battles, appeared to signal the government's now-entrenched repression of dissent.

Liquidators took control of *Le Journal's* assets in January after a Casablanca commercial appeals court declared its parent company bankrupt, lawyers told CPJ. *Le Journal* had been dealt a devastating financial blow in 2006 when a court ordered that it pay 3 million dirhams (US\$354,000) damages in a defamation case filed by Claude Moniquet, head of the Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center. Moniquet said *Le Journal* had defamed him in an article questioning his group's independence. The organization had issued a report on the disputed Western Sahara that the newsweekly said closely reflected the official view of the Moroccan government. In September 2009, the Supreme Court upheld the award, considered the highest of its kind in Moroccan history.

But *Le Journal* co-founder Aboubakr Jamaï told CPJ that the magazine could have withstood the judgment and paid the newsmagazine's creditors "had the authorities refrained from regularly ordering advertisers to boycott" the publication. He said authorities stepped up their interference after he returned from exile in 2009 and resumed his critical journalism. The last issue of *Le Journal* carried an article by Jamaï in which he argued that two of the king's longtime allies, Mohamed Mounir Majidi and Fouad Ali El Himma, exerted disproportionate influence over political and economic life. Majidi was private secretary to the king, while El Himma headed the Party for Authenticity and Modernity, a party reminiscent of groups once set up to promote

allegiance to King Hassan II.

Many journalists began looking back to the transition from Hassan to his son. "The friendly relations between the state and the media during the democratic transition" that followed the 1999 death of Hassan II "gave way 10 years later to a policy of demonization of independent journalism," Anas Ben Saleh, a reporter for the satellite news channel Al-Jazeera, said during a September conference in Rabat organized by a newly established advocacy group, the Organization for Freedom of the Press and Expression in Morocco.

The TelQuel media group closed its pioneering Arabic-language weekly *Nichane* on October 1 after "a persistent advertising boycott," the company said in a statement. It pointed particularly to an advertising pullout by the ONA Group, a leading industrial and financial corporation in which the royal family owns shares. Launched in 2006 by Ahmed Reda Benchems, *Nichane* faced persistent harassment for tackling issues deemed taboo.

The independent *Al-Jarida al-Oula* said it, too, faced the loss of revenue from advertisers pressured by the government to avoid the publication. On May 7, the Casablanca-based daily ceased print publication and moved online. "Our financial difficulties stem from pressure on advertisers due to our editorial line. I believe that after what happened to *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, there is only room left for privately owned and partisan newspapers tolerated by the authorities. The option for us is to move online," founder and editor Ali Anouzla told CPJ.

Al-Jarida al-Oula still faced a potentially large judgment in a much-publicized 2009 defamation case. A Casablanca court ordered *Al-Jarida al-Oula* and two other newspapers – *Al-Massae* and *Al-Ahdath al-Maghrebia* – to pay damages of 1 million dirhams (US\$125,200) apiece to Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. The judgment was appealed, and the case was pending in late year. Libya had pressured Moroccan authorities to bring the case after the independent dailies had run opinion pieces critical of Qaddafi's leadership.

In February, a CPJ delegation met with Communications Minister Khalid Naciri in Rabat to express concerns about politicized prosecutions and harassment of advertisers. "Press freedom is one of the cornerstones of our policy and we have absolutely no intention of wandering away from it," Naciri told the delegation, a comment that reflected an ongoing disparity between official statements and actions. The next month, CPJ wrote to Mohammed VI to express concern about the "widening gap" between the "government's stated commitment to the rule of law and its attacks on critical journalists."

In the letter, CPJ also urged the king to use his constitutional prerogatives to end the unjust imprisonment of Driss Chahtan, editor of the independent weekly *Al-Michaal*. Chahtan had been jailed in October 2009 on charges of "publishing false information" in articles that raised questions about the king's health during a period when the monarch had not been seen in public. Mohammed VI pardoned Chahtan in June 2010, about eight months into the editor's 12-month prison sentence. But Chahtan continued to face a politicized defamation case, filed by the widow of a former military officer who was offended by a 2009 article describing the alleged use of prostitutes to blackmail influential figures. In November, a Casablanca court ordered Chahtan to pay damages of 20,000 dirhams (US\$2,370) to the plaintiff.

Authorities pursued retaliatory charges against another critical journalist. In June, a Rabat court sentenced Taoufik Bouachrine, managing director of *Akhbar al-Yaum al-Maghrebia*, to six months in prison on fraud charges and ordered him to pay 10,000 Moroccan dirhams (US\$1,120) in damages to the former owner of a Rabat villa that the journalist had purchased three years earlier, his lawyer told CPJ. Bouachrine and his lawyer said courts had previously dismissed the case; he and other journalists saw its revival as political retaliation. Bouachrine was free in late year pending appeal.

Bouachrine had incurred the government's wrath in September 2009 when his paper published a cartoon that depicted the wedding of Prince Moulay Ismail, a royal cousin. A Casablanca court

sentenced Bouachrine and cartoonist Khalid Gueddareach to four-year suspended sentences on charges of failing to show respect to the royal family. Police shut *Akhbar al-Youm* after the cartoon was published, although the newspaper resurfaced in 2010 under a new name, *Akhbar al-Youm al-Maghrebia*.

"The frantic refusal of dissent, however insignificant it may be, is a sign of autocratic drift once more. It is how things started in Tunisia before giving way to rough dictatorship. Will this be Morocco's fate?" asked Benchemsi, managing editor of the independent weekly *TelQuel*, in a June editorial. Benchemsi, who was writing about a government campaign against a local human rights group, had been the target of politically motivated prosecutions in the past.

Although Moroccan authorities typically reserve harassment for local news media, they turned their attention in late year to international journalists. On October 29, the government indefinitely withdrew accreditations enabling Al-Jazeera staff to report in the country. The Ministry of Communications accused the station of having "seriously distorted Morocco's image and manifestly damaged its interests, most notably its territorial integrity." The territorial allusion referred to the Western Sahara, a region in dispute between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front. Coverage of the Western Sahara is one of the most sensitive issues for the kingdom.

On November 8, authorities blocked at least 10 Spanish journalists from traveling to the Western Sahara city of Laayoun. The government-owned carrier Royal Air Morocco canceled their flights and informed them that they could not buy other tickets to Laayoune. Moroccan officials, who accused Spanish news media of distorting facts about the regional conflict, also withdrew the accreditation of Luis de Vega, a correspondent for the Spanish newspaper *ABC*, and expelled three other Spanish journalists in November, according to news reports.

Although official restrictions on the Internet are relatively few compared to other countries in the region, Moroccan bloggers faced repression. Blogger Boubaker al-Yadib served a six-month jail term after posting pictures of a police crackdown on student protesters in the southern city of Taghijjt in December 2009, the French daily *Le Monde* reported. He was freed in mid-year.

Topics: Freedom of information, Freedom of expression,

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