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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Morocco

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 68

Legal Environment: 25

Political Environment: 25

Economic Environment: 18

Morocco's constitution guarantees freedom of expression, but the press law prohibits criticism of the monarchy and Islam, and effectively bars coverage of taboo subjects, including the royal family and the government's position on the status of Western Sahara. Libel remains a criminal offense that carries potentially exorbitant fines or prison terms, and legal cases are a primary method of repressing critical reporting. In April 2011, Rachid Nini, the editor of the daily *Al-Massae*, was arrested on charges of disseminating misinformation and attacking state institutions, public figures, and "the security and integrity of the nation and its citizens." Press freedom advocates in Morocco suggested that the charges were politicized and a result of the paper's coverage of corruption cases and investigations of Authenticity and Modernity Party leader Fouad el-Himma. In June, Nini was found guilty, sentenced to one year in prison, and fined 1,000 dirhams (\$125). In December 2011, one of Nini's colleagues, journalist Radwan Hifani, was prevented from entering his office at the *Assabah* newspaper when he returned from vacation, following a dispute with his editor in chief over Hifani's defense of Nini. Other journalists have also been targeted for reporting on corruption. Mohamed al-Dawas, a blogger and anticorruption advocate, was arrested in September on what his

lawyer called politically motivated and trumped-up charges of drug trafficking. Al-Dawas was sentenced to 19 months in prison and fined 20,000 dirhams (\$2,430).

King Mohamed VI and his government wield considerable control over the editorial content of domestic broadcast media. Oversight includes the authority to appoint the heads of all public radio and television stations, and the president and all four board members of the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication, which is responsible for issuing broadcast licenses and monitoring content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements.

Physical attacks on journalists are less common than legal actions, though there were sporadic reports of attacks in 2011, particularly in relation to coverage of the country's February 20 protest movement, which grew following the eruption of prodemocracy uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa early in the year. The February 20 movement, led by students and activists, called for the expansion of democratic freedoms. At least five journalists and bloggers were attacked while covering a March protest in Casablanca. Journalists also reported intimidation – including the confiscation of equipment – while covering the protest movement, despite clear indications that they were media workers and not protesters. Progovernment protesters attacked the Casablanca offices of the independent newspaper *Akhbar al-Youm* in October, cursing its staff and burning copies of the paper.

Self-censorship remains widespread, as many journalists fear heavy fines, prison sentences, or extralegal intimidation and physical violence in retribution for their stories. Nevertheless, some journalists continue to push the boundaries and report on sensitive subjects such as the military, national security, religion, and sexuality.

Foreign publications are widely available in Morocco, but the foreign media are not immune from government repression. In 2010, the government targeted the Qatar-based satellite television network Al-Jazeera, denying accreditation to two of its journalists and accusing it of editorial bias. Authorities rescinded accreditation for all Al-Jazeera journalists working in Morocco in October 2010, effectively suspending the network's reporting in the country. Al-Jazeera remained unable to operate in Morocco in 2011.

According to the constitution, the press in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara is free, but this is not the case in practice. There is little in the way of independent Sahrawi media. Moroccan authorities are sensitive to any reporting that is not in line with the state's official position on Western Sahara, and they continue to expel or detain Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who write critically on the issue. Alternative viewpoints and resources such as online media or independent broadcasts from abroad are not easily accessible to the population.

There are 17 daily and 90 weekly publications in circulation, and it is estimated that more than 70 percent of these are privately owned. Broadcast media are still dominated by the state, and FM radio stations are largely prohibited from airing programs of a political nature. However, residents can access critical reports through pan-Arab and other satellite television channels. The regime uses advertising and subsidies, as well as aggressive financial harassment, to repress critical media coverage.

Approximately 51 percent of the population regularly accessed the internet in 2011, the highest penetration rate in North Africa. There is no official legislation regulating internet content or access, but the government sporadically blocks certain websites and online tools, including Google Earth and the LiveJournal blogging platform. The government monitors blogs and other websites and occasionally cracks down on those who produce critical content. This practice intensified with the rise of the February 20 protest movement. During protests in the southwestern city of Agadir in July, bloggers and online journalists who filmed the unrest were subjected to attacks and intimidation.

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