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Morocco: Drop Charges Against Activist; Faces 4 Years for Social Media Political Commentary

(Washington) – [Moroccan](#) authorities should drop charges against a social media commentator who risks up to four years in prison on a charge of disrespecting the king, Human Rights Watch said today. This case is the latest in a [series of prosecutions](#) against social media commentators criticizing the king.

A court in the northern city of al-Hoceima tried the commentator Rabie al-Ablaq on April 11, 2022, and is expected to issue its verdict on April 25. The charge stems from two videos posted on Facebook and YouTube in which he addressed the king in a casual tone and contrasted his personal wealth to Morocco's widespread poverty. Criminalizing peaceful criticism of those in power is a blatant violation of freedom of expression.

"There is no right more fundamental than the right to criticize those who hold power, even if it's a monarch," said [Eric Goldstein](#), deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Morocco should stop prosecuting critics like Rabie al-Ablaq based on what is in effect a *Lèse Majesté* law."

Al-Ablaq, 35, was active in the Hirak, a street protest movement that demands equal social, economic, and cultural rights for the people from the northern Rif region in Morocco. The Hirak held massive nonviolent street protests in 2016 and 2017, before a police crackdown brought the movement to a halt. About 500 activists were sentenced to prison terms. Most of them have been freed since, but several leaders are still serving sentences of up to 20 years. Al-Ablaq was among those prosecuted and was imprisoned for three years then released in 2020.

On September 21, 2021, al-Ablaq posted a video on Facebook and YouTube, providing political commentary shortly after the National Rally of Independents, a political party led by the wealthy businessman Aziz Akhannouch, won a plurality of seats in Morocco's parliamentary elections. Al-Ablaq posted another video on November 9, after King Mohammed VI appointed Akhannouch chief of government.

In the videos, al-Ablaq called the king "Mister Mohammed Alaoui, who occupies the job of king," which might be considered derogatory in a country where the Constitution imposes "respect and reverence" for the monarch. Al-Ablaq also said that the king and Akhannouch are "both billionaires," and questioned their wealth, including by wondering out loud if it didn't result from "robbing the people."

In March, al-Ablaq was repeatedly summoned to a police station in al-Hoceima, where police agents interrogated him about his video statements. A prosecutor later charged him with "publicly lacking due respect and reverence to the person of the king" under article 179 of the penal code. He was left provisionally free while awaiting trial. Peaceful criticism of state officials is protected speech under international law, and particularly under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Morocco ratified in 1979.

Al-Ablaq was sentenced to five years in prison in June 2017 for "publishing false news" and "usurping the title of journalist," in relation to commentary he published in websites in support of the Hirak's then-ongoing street protests. He obtained a royal pardon and was freed in 2020 after waging several hunger strikes in prison.

Al-Ablaq [said](#) that his 2017 conviction was based on confessions that al-Hoceima's police had extracted from him under torture. He said that police officers beat him in the face while he was handcuffed during interrogation sessions, and tried to suffocate him by shoving a filthy rag in his mouth. Al-Ablaq also said hooded men threatened to rape him several times while he was held in a police station in al-Hoceima.

After a forensic doctor mandated by the National Human Rights Council, a state-affiliated group, visited al-Ablaq in prison in 2017, the doctor wrote a report, later [leaked to the press](#), saying that al-Ablaq “suffered from deep depression and cried continuously,” and that his allegations of police mistreatment were “generally credible due to their coherence and concordance.”

The Moroccan authorities have stepped up their harassment of activists and critics in the past two months, with at least four people facing prosecutions over critical social media posts, Amnesty International [said](#) on April 7. On March 23, the authorities arrested another social media commentator, Saida Alami, and detained and prosecuted her for “offending state officials,” after she criticized on Facebook a top police chief and condemned the repression of journalists and activists. Her trial is ongoing.

“In Morocco, the vibrant independent press of the 2000’s is but a distant memory,” Goldstein said. “Nowadays, the authorities seem to be applying the Moroccan saying, ‘Speak, and you’ll bleed from the nose.’”

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social media commentator
who criticised the king

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