

ATTACKS on the PRESS in 2002

MOROCCO

تقرير 2002 بالعربية

Overview

Algeria

Bahrain

Egypt

Iran

Iraq

Israel and the
Occupied
Territories

Jordan

Kuwait

Lebanon

Mauritania

Morocco

Qatar

Saudi Arabia

Sudan

Syria

Tunisia

Turkey

United Arab
Emirates

Yemen

After Morocco's King Muhammad assumed the throne in 1999, the press continued a trend toward aggressive reporting that had begun during the final years of the rule of his father, the late King Hassan II. However, a number of official restrictions imposed on the press during the last three years have tempered optimism about a new era of liberal media reform. Morocco's press, which has established independent, influential publications that push the government's boundaries of free speech, still operates with the fear of criminal prosecution and harassment.

The new Moroccan Press Code, which was approved in March 2002 but had not gone into effect by year's end, differs little from the previous one. The new statute slightly reduces prison terms for defaming public officials or members of the royal family, but sentences remain lengthy. Authorities also retain the power to revoke publication licenses or to confiscate and suspend publications deemed threatening to public order.

In February, a Casablanca court of appeals convicted Aboubakr Jamaï, publications director of the French-language weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, and Ali Ammar, the newspaper's general director, of defaming Foreign Minister Muhammad Ben Aissa. The charges stemmed from articles published in 2000 in the weekly's now defunct predecessor, *Le Journal*, alleging that Ben Aissa had profited from the purchase of an official residence during his tenure as Moroccan ambassador to the United States in the late 1990s. The court sentenced the journalists to three-month and two-month suspended prison sentences, respectively. Both men were also ordered to pay fines and damages totaling 510,000 dirhams (about US\$44,000) each. The case was appealed to Morocco's highest court, the Court of Cassation. By year's end, no date had been set for the hearing, and it is unclear whether the journalists will be required to pay damages before the high court hears the case.

Le Journal Hebdomadaire and its sister publication, the Arabic-language *Assahifa*, are not the first private publications in the country, but they are considered the first truly independent ones since they are not aligned with any political party or ideology. Television and radio outlets, meanwhile, avoid criticizing the government.

Moroccan authorities also targeted other independent publications, such as the small circulation *Wijhat Nadhar*, which appears on an irregular basis. In May, secret service agents confiscated all 8,000 copies of the magazine before distribution, without explanation. The issue contained the text of a speech by Moulay Hichem, the cousin of King Muhammad and a frequent critic of the monarchy, who is third in line to the throne.

Authorities also harassed *Rissalit al-Futuwwa* and *Al-Adl wil Ihsan*, papers published by the Islamist group Justice and Charity. Both have resorted to publishing and distributing their papers independently because printers refuse to work with them. Also in 2002, the March issue of the French magazine *VSD* was confiscated and barred from distribution because of an article that criticized King Muhammad.

On February 12, José Luis Percebal, a Morocco-based Spanish journalist for the Spanish radio station Cadena Cope, was found dead in his home in the capital, Rabat. Percebal had been stabbed in the back. Sources at Cadena Cope told CPJ that there was no sign of forced entry, but that his cell phone was missing from the crime scene. At year's end, an official at Cadena Cope said the station believes that the murder was not connected to Percebal's journalistic work. The official said that authorities had made some arrests but that a trial had not yet begun.

February 14

Ali Ammar, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*
Aboubakr Jamaï, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*
LEGAL ACTION

Jamaï, publications director of the weekly newspaper *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* and Ammar, the paper's general director, were convicted by a Casablanca court of appeals of defaming Foreign Minister Mohammed Ben Aissa. The charges stemmed from articles published in 2000 in *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*'s now defunct predecessor, *Le Journal*, alleging that Ben Aissa had profited from the purchase of an official residence during his tenure as Morocco's ambassador to the United States in the late 1990s. The journalists argued that in the original trial held in a lower court, the judge used procedural grounds to prevent them from presenting a defense.

The court sentenced Jamaï and Ammar to three-month and two-month suspended prison sentences, respectively. Both men were also ordered to pay fines and damages totaling 510,000 dirhams (US\$44,000) each. The case was appealed to Morocco's highest court, the Court of Cassation. By year's end, no date had been set for the hearing. It is unclear whether the journalists will be required to pay damages before the high court hears the case. Staff at *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* told CPJ that the fines and other penalties could bankrupt the publication.