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# World Report 2026; Morocco and Western Sahara

Moroccan authorities intensified repression of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, convicting them of libel, publishing false news, insulting or defaming local officials, state bodies, foreign heads of state or religion, and undermining state security or the institution of the monarchy. Authorities also continued to repress Western Sahara activists who call for independence.

[Nationwide protests](#) initiated by the youth group GenZ212, calling for better healthcare, education, and an end to corruption gripped the country and some turned violent as security forces used lethal force and arrested hundreds

## Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

During the [GenZ212 protests](#) calling for sweeping reforms and criticizing public spending on mega sporting events including the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations and the 2030 FIFA World Cup, police and gendarmerie officers forcibly dispersed protesters and used lethal force, killing three people and injuring dozens. They arrested around 2,100 people and initiated judicial procedures against at least 1,400, including 330 children, sentencing some to prison terms and fines, according to the [Moroccan Association for Human Rights](#). As of October, around 1,000 remained detained.

On March 3, a Casablanca Court [sentenced](#) prominent activist Fouad Abdelmoumni in absentia to six months in prison and a fine of 2,000 dirhams (about US\$208), over a Facebook post on French-Moroccan relations. Prosecutors had charged Abdelmoumni on November 1, 2024, with “insulting public authorities, spreading false allegations, and reporting a fictitious crime he knew did not occur.”

On June 16, the Rabat Court of Appeal [upheld](#) the sentencing of Hamid Elmahdaoui, editor-in-chief of the website Badil and a frequent government critic, to 18 months in prison and a fine of 1.5 million Dirhams (about \$150,000) on appeal. The Court of First Instance had [convicted](#) him of “broadcasting and distributing false allegations and facts in order to defame people, slander, and public insult” in 2024.

On August 10, the Rabat First Instance Court charged activist Ibtissame Lachgar with “causing harm to Islam” after she posted a photo of herself on social media wearing a shirt with the words “Allah is lesbian.” The court found she had violated Morocco’s penal code and on September 3 [sentenced](#) her to 30 months in prison and a fine of 50,000 Moroccan dirhams (approximately US\$5,500). On October 6, the Rabat Appeals Court upheld the prison sentence, which her defense team reportedly [said](#) they would appeal.

A group of 40 protesters from the Hirak movement which organized mass protests in 2016 - 2017, 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. In August 2024, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [found](#) that Zefzafi’s detention violated international law and called for his immediate release.

Despite nation-wide union strikes, Morocco’s constitutional court in March [upheld](#) a [contested law](#) on the right to strike that labor organizations opposed for infringing on workers’ rights.

## Women’s and Girl’s Rights

Under the [2004 Family Code](#), a child's father is the default legal representative even when the mother has custody of the child after divorce. Women and girls inherit half of what their male relatives receive. The minimum age of marriage is 18, but judges can grant exemptions for girls as young as 15. Marital rape is not explicitly criminalized, and reporting rape outside of marriage risks prosecution as sex outside of marriage is [criminalized](#) and punishable by imprisonment of up to two years.

In [December 2024](#), the government [presented](#) draft reforms to the family code "Moudawana," including granting women equal rights with men in child custody and guardianship in the case of divorce, raising the minimum age for child marriage exemptions to 17, and placing stricter limits on polygamy. [Equality](#) between men and women in inheritance and decriminalization of extramarital relationships were not addressed. The proposed reforms have yet to be [approved and implemented](#).

The penal code [criminalizes](#) abortion with a penalty of up to two years in prison and five years for abortion providers. Exceptions apply only when the woman's life or health is at risk.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Same-sex relations are criminalized with up to three years in prison under Article 489.

## Migrants and Refugees

As of April, there were over 18,400 refugees and asylum seekers in Morocco [registered](#) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

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

Hundreds of migrants in Morocco attempted to [swim](#) along the Mediterranean coast to reach the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, including children, many of whom were returned to Morocco by Spanish and Moroccan authorities. According to the [International Organization for Migration](#), as of September, at least 200 people had died while attempting to cross the Western Mediterranean route between North Africa and Spain. The European Union [continued to cooperate](#) with Morocco on [migration control](#) despite human rights concerns.

## Western Sahara

Morocco has occupied most of Western Sahara since 1975. Morocco and the Algeria-based Polisario Front, a liberation movement for Western Sahara, agreed in 1991 to a UN-brokered ceasefire in anticipation of a referendum on self-determination. Morocco has rejected holding such a vote if it includes independence as an option.

The UN Security Council on October 31 renewed the [mandate](#) of United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), explicitly stating that Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal that envisions self-governing under Moroccan sovereignty, would be the basis for negotiations.

According to Morocco, as of October, [118 countries](#) backed the country's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, including the US, France, Spain, and Germany. Support for the autonomy proposal continued to gain momentum in 2025 as [Kenya](#) announced its backing in May, followed by the [United Kingdom](#) in June, and [Portugal](#) in July.

In 2020, the Polisario Front [announced](#) an end to the ceasefire with Morocco and resumed its armed struggle. The UN classifies the Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory, and the African Union formally recognizes Western Sahara's independence.

The European Court of Justice in October 2024, [confirmed](#) the annulment of association agreements between the European Union and Morocco insofar as they include Western Sahara. The ruling cancels trade deals that allowed Morocco to export fish and farm products to the EU that originated in the Western Sahara region considering it in breach of their “right to self-determination.”

Nineteen Sahrawi men, known as the Gdeim Izik Group, 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.

UNHCR estimates there were [173,000](#) Sahrawi refugees living in five camps near the southwestern Algerian town of Tindouf.