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Freedom in the World 2011 - Morocco

Capital: Rabat

Population: 31,495,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Explanatory Note

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Western Sahara, which is examined in a separate report.

Overview

The king retained Prime Minister Abbas el-Fassi in a January 2010 cabinet shuffle, and the government continued to suppress criticism of its Western Sahara policies and other matters during the year. As part of a broader campaign against critical media coverage, the authorities in October revoked the accreditation of journalists working for Al-Jazeera, the Qatar-based satellite television station.

Morocco gained independence in 1956 after more than four decades of French rule. The first ruler after independence, King Mohamed V, reigned until his death in 1961. His son, the autocratic Hassan II, then ruled the country until 1999. Thousands of his political

opponents were arrested, tortured and killed, while many simply disappeared. This repression was particularly acute in the years following two failed coup attempts in 1971 and 1972. In 1975, Morocco and Mauritania occupied Western Sahara; after three years of fighting the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, a Sahrawi nationalist guerrilla movement, Mauritania withdrew from the portion it claimed. Morocco then annexed the territory in full. A planned referendum on Western Sahara's future – attached to a UN-monitored ceasefire agreement in 1991 – never took place. In the last few years of his life, Hassan initiated a political opening. Several political prisoners were released, independent newspapers began publishing, and a new bicameral parliament was established in 1997.

King Mohamed VI inherited the throne in 1999 at age 35. He declined to expand political freedom much further in the first years of his reign, apparently aiming to check the increased influence of Islamist political parties. However, he removed longtime interior minister Driss Basri, who had led much of the repression under King Hassan, and allowed exiled dissidents to return to the country.

Parliamentary elections held in 2002 were recognized as generally open. Over a dozen political parties participated, though independent journalists and other critics of the king were harassed and detained.

In May 2003, local Islamist militants with purported links to Al-Qaeda mounted a series of deadly suicide bombings, targeting symbols of Morocco's Jewish community in Casablanca. The government responded by enacting a harsh antiterrorism law, but it was subsequently used to prosecute nonviolent opponents of the king. An anti-immigration law was also passed, ostensibly to fight illegal immigration from sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2004, King Mohamed inaugurated the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER), tasked with addressing the human rights abuses perpetrated by the authorities from 1956 to 1999 and providing the victims with reparations. The commission, which was unprecedented in the Arab world, was headed by a former political prisoner and allowed victims to testify in public hearings. It submitted its final report to the king in 2006, including a series of recommendations for legal and institutional reforms designed to prevent future abuses. Critics of the IER complained that it did not hold perpetrators to account for their actions, and that its recommendations did not lead to major structural changes. Human rights abuses continued to occur on a regular basis, albeit on a smaller scale; political Islamism remained especially circumscribed. Moreover, the authorities were intolerant of further discussion of past abuses. In June 2008, a court in Rabat ordered the private daily *Al-Jarida al-Oula* to stop publishing IER testimony.

The 2007 elections for the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of Parliament, drew the lowest turnout in Moroccan history, 37 percent. The Socialist Union of People's Forces (USFP), previously the lead party in the governing coalition, fell to 38 seats. Its chief ally, the conservative Independence Party (Istiqlal), won a plurality of 52 seats. Opposition parties, which had criticized the elections as unfair, gained fewer seats than expected. The largest, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), placed second with 46 seats. Istiqlal leader Abbas el-Fassi was appointed prime minister.

El-Fassi appeared to have fallen out of favor in 2009, as former deputy interior minister Fouad Ali el-Himma, a close associate of the king, organized the Modernity and Authenticity Party (PAM) to contest local elections in June. The new party led the voting with more than 20 percent of local council seats, followed by Istiqlal with about 19 percent. Widespread vote buying, bribery, intimidation, and other forms of manipulation were reported, and analysts regarded the official turnout figure of 52 percent with some skepticism.

Despite the challenges to the Istiqlal's preeminence, el-Fassi remained prime minister after a cabinet shuffle in January 2010. Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa was replaced with Tayeb Cherkaoui, who was seen by some observers as less severe than his predecessor. Cherkaoui announced in August that a drug-trafficking network tied to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had been dismantled. Also during the year, the king established a new Advisory Commission on Regionalization to help improve local governance.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Morocco is not an electoral democracy. Most power is held by the king and his close advisers. The monarch can dissolve Parliament, rule by decree, and dismiss or appoint cabinet members. He controls four sovereign ministries: Foreign, Judiciary, Islamic Affairs, and Interior. He sets national and foreign policy, commands the armed forces and intelligence services, and presides over the judicial system. One of the king's constitutional titles is "commander of the faithful," giving his authority a claim to religious legitimacy.

The lower house of Parliament, the Chamber of Representatives, has 325 directly elected members who serve for five-year terms. Members of the 270-seat upper house, the Chamber of Counselors, are chosen by an electoral college to serve nine-year terms. Thirty seats in the lower house are reserved for women, and under a rule that took effect in 2009, women are guaranteed 12 percent of the seats in local elections.

Given the concentration of power in the monarchy, the country's fragmented political parties and even the cabinet are generally unable to assert themselves. The most vocal opposition party that remains respectful of the monarchy is the PJD, which fared poorly in local elections in 2009. The popular Justice and Charity Movement, an Islamist group, is illegal but generally tolerated by the authorities. Other, more explicitly nonviolent Islamist groups that criticize the monarchical system are harassed by authorities and not permitted to participate in the political process.

Despite the government's rhetoric on combating widespread corruption, it remains a structural problem, both in public life and in the business world. Morocco was ranked 85 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although the independent press enjoys a significant degree of freedom when reporting on economic and social policies, the authorities use the restrictive press law and an array of financial and other, more subtle mechanisms to punish critical journalists, particularly those who focus on the king, his family, or Islam. The managing editor of the daily *Akhbar al-Youm* was sentenced to six months in prison on dubious fraud charges in June 2010, having apparently escaped a suspended prison sentence and fine for publishing a cartoon of the king's cousin after the cousin asked that the sentence be voided in late 2009. Also during the year, the critical weeklies *Nichane* and *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* were forced to shut down under heavy financial pressure from a government-linked advertising boycott and a defamation penalty, respectively.

The state dominates the broadcast media, but residents have access to foreign satellite television channels. In late October 2010, the authorities indefinitely suspended reporting by the Qatar-based satellite channel Al-Jazeera and revoked the accreditations of its staff in the country, apparently due to its critical coverage of the Western Sahara issue. Several foreign journalists were reportedly assaulted during the year while working on Western Sahara-related stories. The authorities occasionally disrupt websites and internet platforms, while bloggers and other internet users are sometimes arrested for posting content that offends the monarchy. In February 2010, blogger and activist Boubaker al-Yadib was sentenced to six months in prison for encouraging a protest in defense of freedom of expression.

Nearly all Moroccans are Muslims. While the small Jewish community is permitted to practice its faith without government interference, Moroccan authorities are growing increasingly intolerant of social and religious diversity, as reflected in arrest campaigns against Shiites, Muslim converts to Christianity, and those opposed to a law enforcing the Ramadan fast. While university campuses generally provide a space for open

discussion, professors practice self-censorship when dealing with sensitive topics like Western Sahara, the monarchy, and Islam.

Freedom of assembly is not well respected, and protests in Western Sahara especially have been controlled through violence and threats. Three Western Saharan activists were put on trial in Casablanca in September 2010 for "undermining internal security." On November 8, two days of deadly clashes erupted in the Western Sahara town of Laayoune after Moroccan forces moved to break up a protest camp set up to demand jobs and better social services. Civil society and independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are quite active, though the authorities monitor Islamist groups and arrest suspected extremists. While NGOs in Morocco operate with more freedom than in many other states in the Middle East and North Africa, groups that offend the government face harassment.

Moroccan workers are permitted to form and join independent trade unions, and the 2004 labor law prevents employers from punishing workers who do so. However, the authorities have forcibly broken up labor actions that entail criticism of the government, and child laborers, especially girls working as domestic helpers, are denied basic rights.

The judiciary is not independent, and the courts are regularly used to punish opponents of the government. In a case associated with a Belgian-Moroccan national, Abdelkader Belliraj, 35 people were arrested in February 2008 and convicted in July 2009 of forming a terrorist group, plotting attacks, and raising funds through criminal activities. However, according to Human Rights Watch, the alleged acts were limited to one assassination attempt in 1996 and robberies committed a decade ago. The defendants claimed that confessions and statements in the case were made under torture, and that they were simply members of political parties that the government wanted to eliminate. In November 2010, Spanish authorities extradited Ali Aarrass, a dual Belgian-Moroccan national, to Morocco. He had been arrested in Spain in April 2008 on the basis of international arrest warrants issued by Morocco for allegedly being part of the group headed by Belliraj. Human rights groups voiced concerns that Aarrass would face torture and other human rights violations in Morocco.

Arbitrary arrest and torture still occur, though they are less common than under King Hassan. The security forces are given greater leeway for abuse with detainees advocating independence for Western Sahara.

Many Moroccans have a mixed Arab-Berber ancestry, and the government has officially recognized the language and culture of the Berbers.

Women continue to face a great deal of discrimination at the societal level. However, Moroccan authorities have a more progressive view on gender equality than leaders in many Arab countries. The 2004 family code has been lauded for granting women increased rights in the areas of marriage and child custody, and various other laws aim to protect women's interests.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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