

Title	Freedom in the World 2012 - Morocco
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Morocco
Publication Date	24 July 2012
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2012 - Morocco</i> , 24 July 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/500fda38c.html [accessed 4 December 2012]
Disclaimer	This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Freedom in the World 2012 - Morocco

2012 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating: 4.5

Civil Liberties: 4

Political Rights: 5

Overview

Large demonstrations were held on February 20 to demand democratic political reforms. Although the king responded with a revised constitution that won approval in a July referendum, the protest movement continued to press for more substantive curbs on the monarch's power. Parliamentary elections held on November 25 resulted in a victory for the Islamist opposition Justice and Development Party, with Abdelilah Benkirane named prime minister. Meanwhile a bomb attack in a Marrakesh café in April killed 17 people and wounded some two dozen.

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, Hassan II, then ruled the country until his death in July 1999. Thousands of his political opponents were arrested, tortured and killed, while many simply disappeared. 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. 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 was headed by a former political prisoner and allowed victims to testify in public hearings. It submitted its final report 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 37 percent of the eligible electorate, the lowest turnout in Moroccan history. 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 by 2008, 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 2009. 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 Istiqlal's leadership, el-Fassi remained prime minister after a cabinet shuffle in January 2010.

In 2011, the political environment was shaken by protests inspired by popular uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Demonstrations demanding democratic political reforms were held across the country on February 20, and the resulting protest movement, named for this date and comprised of students and activists, continued to press for change throughout the year.

After naming a commission to draft a new constitution in response to the protests, the king presented the proposed document in June. It preserved most of the monarch's existing powers, particularly in the areas of religion and security, and he retained authority over key cabinet positions. But he would now be required to choose the prime minister from the party that wins the most seats in parliamentary elections, and consult the prime minister before dissolving Parliament. Among other provisions, the draft constitution also gave official status to the Berber language, called for gender equality, and emphasized respect for human rights. Although the February 20 movement rejected the changes as insufficient, the main political parties encouraged voters to approve the document in a July referendum, and it reportedly passed with over 98 percent of the vote.

Parliamentary elections were held under the new charter in November, resulting in a victory for the opposition PJD, which took 107 of the 395 seats in the lower house. Istiqlal placed second with 60 seats, followed by the National Rally of Independents with 52, the PAM with 47, the USFP with 39, the Popular Movement with 32, the Constitutional Union with 23, and the Progress and Socialism Party with 18. Ten smaller parties divided the remainder. The February 20 movement and some Islamist and leftist groups had called for a boycott of the vote, but turnout was 45 percent, an increase from the low figure reported in 2007. Abdelilah Benkirane of the PJD was named prime minister, and he formed a coalition government with Istiqlal, the Popular Movement (a

party of rural notables), and the Party of Progress and Socialism (the former communist party).

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Morocco is not an electoral democracy. Most power is held by the king and his close advisers. Even under the 2011 constitution, the monarch can dissolve Parliament, rule by decree, and dismiss or appoint cabinet members. 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 king is also the majority stakeholder in a vast array of private and public sector firms.

The lower house of Parliament, the Chamber of Representatives, has 395 directly elected members who serve for five-year terms. Sixty of these seats are reserved for women, and 30 for men under age 40. Members of the 270-seat upper house, the Chamber of Counselors, are chosen by an electoral college to serve nine-year terms. 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 PJD, which won the 2011 parliamentary vote, has long been a vocal opposition party, even as it remained respectful of the monarchy. By contrast, the popular Justice and Charity Movement, also Islamist in its political orientation, is illegal, though it is generally tolerated by the authorities. Other Islamist groups further to the political right 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 80 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although the independent press enjoys a significant degree of freedom when reporting on economic and social policies, the authorities use restrictive press laws and an array of financial and other, more subtle mechanisms to punish critical journalists, particularly those who focus on the king, his family, the status of the Western Sahara, or Islam. Rachid Nini, editor of the daily *Al-Massae*, was detained in April after the newspaper published articles on alleged corruption involving the royal palace and PAM leader Fouad Ali el-Himma. The paper had also called for the repeal of the 2003 antiterrorism law. Nini was sentenced in June to a year in prison for disinformation and

attacking the "security and integrity of the nation and citizens," and an appellate court upheld the sentence in October.

The state dominates the broadcast media, but residents have access to foreign satellite television channels. It was reported in June 2011 that Information Minister Khalid Naciri obtained the dismissal of both the chief editor and the Morocco correspondent for Dubai TV after the station reported on calls to boycott the July constitutional referendum. The authorities occasionally disrupt websites and internet platforms, while bloggers and other internet users are sometimes arrested for posting content that offends the monarchy.

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. The February 20 movement remained salient throughout 2011, holding weekly demonstrations to protest the constitutional reforms and often drawing thousands of participants. Detentions and violence by police were reported, including disburse a protest in Rabat in May.

Civil society and independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are quite active and operate with more freedom than in many states in the region, but the authorities monitor Islamist groups, arrest suspected extremists, and harass other groups that offend the government. 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. Among the prisoners pardoned during 2011 were several from the so-called Belliraj case whose terrorism convictions in 2009 were widely seen as political fabrications. In April 2011, a bomb exploded in a Marrakesh café filled with tourists, killing 17 and injuring two dozen. Morocco blamed Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. On October 28, Adel al-Othmani was convicted of planting the bomb and received the death

sentence; five other accomplices were given harsh sentences. Arbitrary arrest and torture still occur, though they are less common than under King Hassan. The security forces are given greater leeway with detainees advocating independence for Western Sahara, leading to frequent reports of abuse and lack of due process.

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 relatively progressive view on gender equality, which is recognized in the 2011 constitution. The 2004 family code has been lauded for granting women increased rights in the areas of marriage, divorce, and child custody, and various other laws aim to protect women's interests.

Explanatory Note

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

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved