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FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

# Morocco

**54**  
/100

PARTLY FREE

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	<b>17</b> /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	<b>21</b> /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	<b>16</b> /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

**53** /100    **Partly Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.



# Key Developments, June 1, 2023 - May 31, 2024

Internet freedom in Morocco remains tenuous. While cyberattacks have diminished in recent years, online users remain subject to surveillance, arrests, and harassment for their online activities. Self-censorship around Western Sahara, the royal family, and religion remain pervasive, and the proliferation of progovernment outlets and state-sponsored propaganda drowns out critical voices online.

- In September 2023, an earthquake in Marrakesh killed nearly 3,000 people and resulted in widespread power and internet outages, impacting an estimated 1.2 million users (see A1).
- Controversial legislation, approved in June 2023, replaced the National Press Council with an appointed committee whose tasks include granting and revoking press passes and reviewing proposals by aspiring new media outlets. The latter would require a €100,000 (\$108,150) deposit (see B6).
- Two individuals were sentenced to five years in prison for making Facebook posts criticizing Morocco's relationship with Israel (see C3).
- During the coverage period, the Moroccan government filed several defamation suits against French media outlets that had accused the government of using spyware (see C5). In June 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that the Moroccan government likely uses spyware (see C5).

## Political Overview

Morocco holds regular multiparty elections for the parliament and local bodies. Reforms in 2011 shifted some authority over the government from the monarchy to the national legislature. Nevertheless, King Mohammed VI and his palace maintain full dominance through a combination of substantial formal powers, informal lines of influence in state and society, and ownership of crucial economic resources. Many civil liberties are constrained in practice.

Editor's Note: *Western Sahara is not covered in this report. Certain territories that are assessed separately in Freedom House's Freedom in the World reports are excluded from the relevant country reports in Freedom on the Net, as conditions in such territories differ significantly from those in the rest of the country.*

## A. Obstacles to Access

**A1** 0-6 pts

**Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?**

**5/6**

While fixed-line internet speeds and penetration rates increased during the coverage period, obstacles to access remain in rural areas (see A2). In September 2023, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake struck Morocco, killing nearly 3,000 people and resulting in widespread power and internet outages that impacted an estimated 1.2 million users. **1** While estimates of the length of these outages vary, the internet appears to have been promptly restored.

The percentage of people using the internet has grown in recent years. The internet penetration rate stood at 90.7 percent in early 2024, up from 88.1 percent in January 2023. Mobile penetration has also improved, and subscriptions increased by 2.5 percent between 2023 and 2024. **2**

Both fixed-line and mobile internet speeds steadily increased over the coverage period. As of April 2024, the median mobile download speed stood at 42.58 megabits per second (Mbps), while the median upload speed was 11.57 Mbps. As of April 2024, the median download speed for fixed-line broadband connections was 31.15 Mbps, while the median upload speed was 26.31 Mbps. **3**

The government has undertaken several programs over the years to improve the country's information and communication technologies (ICT) sector, including the granting of long-term evolution (LTE) technology licenses to telecommunications companies. **4** The National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (ANRT) has adopted general guidelines for the ICT sector through 2023. **5** The program aims to increase fiber-optic and other high-speed connections throughout the country, reinforce the existing regulatory framework, and provide universal access to high-

speed broadband and mobile broadband networks. As part of ongoing efforts to expand internet access to rural areas, **6** an initiative funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has extended internet access to nearly 700 residents in Ait Izdeg, a remote town deep in the Atlas Mountains, since 2022. **7**

In 2023, three major Moroccan internet service providers (ISPs), Maroc Telecom, Orange Maroc (formerly Medi Telecom), and Inwi, along with Spanish telecom agency INTELCOM, announced a new internet exchange point (IXP) deal in Morocco. **8**

**A2** 0-3 pts

<b>Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?</b>	<b>2/3</b>
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Internet usage remains relatively affordable despite rising inflation; however, network coverage is uneven between urban and rural areas.

According to the most recent annual report from the High Authority of Audiovisual Communication (HACA), which covered 2022, urban dwellers are more likely to have internet access than rural inhabitants, with urban penetration at 91.6 percent compared with 77.3 percent in rural areas. **9** Rural inhabitants constitute 35 percent of the overall population, **10** and while many have access to electricity, television, and radio, most do not have access to phone lines and high-speed internet. The high rate of illiteracy, especially among rural women, is another major obstacle to internet access. **11**

During the previous coverage period, soaring inflation led to a 20.1 percent year-to-year increase in food prices, which have remained high, with a 10.4 percent increase between 2023 and 2024. **12** Despite fluctuating living costs, internet prices have remained stable and relatively affordable. For a fourth-generation-plus technology (4G+) prepaid connection with speeds up to 225 Mbps, Maroc Telecom customers pay 99 Moroccan dirhams (\$9.67) per month for 15 gigabytes (GB) of data; if exceeded, they can pay 20 dirhams (\$1.96) for an additional 2 GB package. **13** The average annual income in Morocco stood at 384,471 dirhams (\$38,240) in April 2024. **14**

**A3** 0-6 pts

**Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?**

**5/6**

Authorities have not imposed any restrictions on connectivity in recent years. However, the partial centralization of Morocco's internet infrastructure enables the government to restrict connectivity and facilitates the potential control of content and surveillance.

The three main telecommunications operators—Maroc Telecom, Orange Maroc, and Inwi—have varying access to international connectivity. **15** In terms of ICT infrastructure, Maroc Telecom, a partially state-owned company that dominates the sector for both fixed-line broadband and mobile services, owns and controls a fiber-optic backbone of more than 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles). **16** The state-controlled National Railways Office and National Office of Electricity and Water have also built 2,000- and 4,000-kilometer (1,250- and 2,500-mile) fiber-optic infrastructures, respectively.

**A4** 0-6 pts

**Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?**

**4/6**

The ANRT exercises significant oversight over ISP operations, including regulatory conditions, prices, and infrastructure. **17**

Maroc Telecom, Orange Maroc (formerly Medi Telecom), **18** and Inwi are the country's only licensed ISPs and mobile service providers. Maroc Telecom is a former state company that held a monopoly over the ICT sector until 1999, when licenses were granted to Medi Telecom and Inwi. **19** The company is now owned by Etisalat of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Moroccan state, which maintains a 30 percent stake. **20** Inwi (formerly called Wana and Maroc Connect) is a subsidiary of Al Mada, a Moroccan industrial conglomerate owned by the royal family. Fourth-generation (4G) licenses were granted to the three telecommunications companies, and the technology was first utilized in April 2015.

In August 2022, Maroc Telecom filed an appeal against a 2.45 billion Moroccan dirham (\$238 million) fine levied by the ANRT for the company's "misuse of a dominating position" in the telecommunications market. An ANRT inquiry against Maroc Telecom for abusing its monopoly over the ICT infrastructure was originally launched in May 2017 after Inwi filed a complaint with the regulator. **22**

While Maroc Telecom effectively controls the telephone-cable infrastructure, the ANRT is tasked with setting the prices at which the company's rivals (such as Orange Maroc and Inwi) can access those cables. Thus, the ANRT can make sure that the competition in the market is fair and leads to affordable services for Moroccan consumers. **23** The ANRT's licensing regulations as outlined in Law No. 24-96 require ISPs to conform to the "requirements of national defense and public security and the prerogatives of the judicial authority." **24**

**A5** 0-4 pts

<b>Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?</b>	<b>1 / 4</b>
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The ANRT was created in 1998 to regulate and liberalize the ICT sector. Its board of directors is made up of government ministers, and its head is appointed by the king. The founding law of the ANRT extols the ICT sector as a driving force for Morocco's social and economic development, and the government agency is meant to create an efficient and transparent regulatory framework that favors competition among operators. **25** The ANRT is not consistently transparent in its operations, having failed to publish an annual report since 2018. **26**

The ANRT director and administrative board are appointed via a *dahir* (royal decree), leaving the agency open to politicization. However, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) have not expressed any major concerns regarding the ANRT's neutrality. **27**

The allocation of digital resources, such as domain names, is carried out in a nondiscriminatory manner. The ANRT manages the top-level country domain .ma through various private providers, some of which are affiliated with the three main telecommunications companies. **28** During the coverage period, the bureau charged with standardization in Morocco, the Moroccan Standards Institute

(IMANOR), issued an updated framework of what constitutes a domain name in an effort to streamline norms and practices relating to domain names. **29**

## B. Limits on Content

**B1** 0-6 pts

<b>Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?</b>	<b>6/6</b>
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The government did not block or filter any political, social, or religious websites during the coverage period.

Social media and communications services, including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, are available in the country, as are international blog-hosting services. Websites that discuss controversial views or human rights causes—such as the disputed territory of Western Sahara, LGBT+ rights, and critical views of the monarchy—are also accessible.

The last instance of government blocking of online content occurred in 2013, when the attorney general ordered the ANRT to block the Arabic- and French-language websites of the investigative news outlet Lakome for allegedly condoning terrorism. **30** An article on the site had reported on a video attributed to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), though it did not itself incite violence or promote terrorism. **31**

**B2** 0-4 pts

<b>Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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The government maintains control over the information landscape through a series of restrictive laws that can require the closure of outlets and the removal of online content (see B3). The government also resorts to more ad hoc extralegal means to remove content that is deemed controversial or undesirable. For

example, the news outlet Hespess, which has featured content both supportive and critical of the government, deleted videos of street protests and interviews with opposition figures several years ago because of anticipated or actual pressure from authorities. **32**

In September 2022, Moroccan political activist Hassan Bennajeh was summoned by the authorities over an online post that criticized Morocco’s normalization of relations with Israel (see C3). The post in question was published in May 2022 and related to the murder of a Palestinian journalist by Israeli security forces. The post, which was deemed to be “anti-Israel,” was reportedly taken down. **33**

At times, authorities have requested that social media platforms remove certain content. Between January and June 2022, Meta received a request from the Moroccan government to restrict access to an undisclosed Facebook page or group. **34** In an update from a 2020 request, Meta disclosed that it “restricted access in Morocco to one item reported by the Ministry of Interior of Morocco for content expressing anti-king sentiment.” **35**

Activists have also described cases in which security officials told them to remove or change critical content or face criminal charges, resulting in what many describe as a pervasive environment of self-censorship (see B4). **36** In March 2022, Brahim Nafai, the national secretary of the Democratic Way political party’s youth wing, was interrogated by police after calling for boycotts over rising fuel prices on Facebook (see B8). Following the interrogation, Nafai’s Facebook account was suspended, and the post in question was deleted. **37**

In March 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a YouTuber with a large following posted a video in which she claimed that the coronavirus did not exist. She was later arrested and sentenced to one year in prison for “sharing fake news.” **38** The YouTube video is no longer available; whether it was taken down by the authorities or the account owner herself is unclear.

**B3** 0-4 pts

**Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?**

**2/4**

Online content can be restricted under broad legislation. For example, the 2003 Law to Combat Terror, known as the antiterrorism law, **39** gives the government sweeping powers to filter and delete content that is deemed to “disrupt public order by intimidation, force, violence, fear, or terror.” **40** Article 218(6) assigns legal liability to the author and to anyone who helps the author to disseminate information deemed to justify acts of terrorism, which includes site owners and ISPs. While the law was ostensibly designed to combat terrorism, authorities retain the discretion to define vague terms such as “national security” and “public order” as they please, opening the door for abuse. Many opposition news sites are hosted on servers outside the country to avoid being shut down by the authorities. Intermediaries must block or delete infringing content when made aware of it or upon receipt of a court order. **41**

Under the 2016 Press and Publications Code, known as the press code, **42** the government has the right to shut down any publication “prejudicial to Islam, the monarchy, territorial integrity, or public order,” and it can seek heavy fines or prison sentences under the penal code for the publication of offensive content (see C2).

**B4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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Users who openly discuss controversial social issues and political events on social media are increasingly targeted by coordinated harassment campaigns, contributing to a growing climate of self-censorship. Journalists also self-censor. For example, when reporting on political issues, they may “refrain from publishing some of the sensitive information at their disposal,” according to Mohamed el-Aouni, the president of the Organization for the Freedom of Media and Expression in Morocco. **43** This tendency to self-censor negatively affects the quality of reporting in the country. **44**

Users reportedly self-censor on issues related to Morocco’s claim on Western Sahara, the monarchy, and religion—all of which are considered taboo. The state’s increased deployment of surveillance technologies (see C5) **45** and the proliferation of progovernment trolls also drive some users to self-censor.

Moreover, many online journalists have been jailed or investigated on serious charges in a bid to silence them, with court proceedings often repeatedly postponed to maintain the threat of jail time (see C3). **46**

Coordinated harassment campaigns, personal attacks, and derogatory comments received by activists and opinion makers online—often in response to their criticism of government policies—also contribute to self-censorship (see B5). **47** At times, the targets of this harassment removed their posts. For example, Moroccan journalist Aida Alami, who was active on Twitter and regularly covered trials of other journalists in Morocco, has gone almost completely silent after facing several waves of harassment, including death threats, for her reporting. **48** Publications known for close ties to the state, including Chouf TV, Barlamane, and Le360 also often publish articles that defame and harass critical voices, further contributing to practices of self-censorship. **49**

**B5** 0-4 pts

<b>Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?</b>	<b>2 / 4</b>
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Many of the major online news sources are directly or indirectly linked to powerful figures connected to or within the Moroccan state, including the security forces. The influence of these individuals, who range from wealthy businesspeople to royal advisers, **50** skews the online news landscape toward the interests of those in power. **51**

In April 2023, the Moroccan government proposed legislation that would replace the self-regulated National Press Council with a committee tasked with “reviewing regulatory proposals,” which could hinder the creation of new or independent media outlets (see B6). **52** Critics condemned the legislation as “the sign of a clear desire on the part of the government to regain control over the media” as well as over the content journalists produce. **53**

During the coverage period and following the escalation of the Israel-Hamas war, reports emerged that linked over 22,000 Moroccan accounts on X to pro-Israel bot farms. **54** According to a report published in October 2023 by Eekad Facts, an open-source intelligence platform, these accounts are part of a coordinated effort

designed to artificially shape a narrative of Moroccan backing for Israel. **55** Similar reports circulated in the previous coverage period; for example, an Israeli-based network reportedly engaged in online disinformation campaigns that sought to manipulate political or social perceptions in foreign countries. **56** The network, known as Team Jorge, was found to have conducted a disinformation campaign targeting Morocco with the hashtag #PolisarioCrime in an attempt to link the liberation movement in Western Sahara with Iran and Hezbollah. **57** Team Jorge is a disinformation-for-hire network that relies on software that can control up to 30,000 fake online profiles to widely share disinformation content. **58**

Media outlets that openly support the government are known to publish false and misleading information to defame critics and influence public perception (see C7).

**59** ChoufTV, which is well known for engaging in such activity, is among a growing number of outlets that receive state subsidies due to their favorable reporting. **60** Other beneficiaries include Barlamane, Telexpresse, Maroc Medias, and Ana al-Akhbar (see B6). **61** ChoufTV has violated Moroccan privacy laws with apparent impunity, and authorities have allowed it to livestream sensitive operations, including the dismantling of a terrorist cell, but have not allowed other outlets to do so. **62**

In addition, progovernment online media outlets sometimes publish private and false information about government critics. **63** For example, in recent years, news outlets with close ties to security services published allegations that journalist and newspaper editor Soulaymane Raissouni sexually assaulted a young man. These reports culminated in his arrest in May 2020. **64** Raissouni worked with the independent newspaper *Akhbar al-Youm*; its previous editor, Taoufik Bouachrine, was arrested in February 2018 on charges including sexual assault and convicted that November. **65** *Akhbar al-Youm* remained one of the country's only independent and opposition daily newspapers until it closed in March 2021 (see B6). The crackdown on its journalists fits into a broader pattern of authorities stifling independent news outlets.

Anonymous progovernment accounts known as “e-flies” have launched coordinated harassment campaigns against prominent human rights defenders (see B4). **66** Many of these accounts present themselves as “defenders of the Kingdom’s sacred foundations” and publicly express their loyalty to members of the government by praising the head of national security and the king.

In February 2021, Facebook reported that it removed 385 individual accounts, 6 pages, and 40 Instagram accounts that were primarily used to “comment on news and pro-government stories from various news outlets including ChoufTV” (see B2). The report further adds that these accounts “frequently posted criticism of [the] King’s opposition, human rights organizations and dissidents” while praising the government’s COVID-19 response. **67**

There has been a growing trend of coordinated online activity from the self-dubbed “Moorish” movement. According to recent research, pages and profiles associated with this trend promote “patriarchal, ultra- and ethnonationalist, misogynist, and racist” content online. **68** These accounts, which are used to target journalists and activists online, benefit from the support of government officials who like and share their content. **69** Likewise, many of these accounts actively share and promote the content of their government-affiliated counterparts, namely originating from accounts belonging to Moroccan diplomats and embassies. **70**

**B6** 0-3 pts

<b>Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online?</b>	<b>1/3</b>
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Morocco’s more critical online outlets operate in an environment where the government is known to use financial pressure to push their most outspoken print-based counterparts into closure or bankruptcy. This pressure, along with the authorities’ targeting of the staff of print-based publications with criminal charges, eventually led to the March 2021 closure of *Akhbar al-Youm*. **71**

In June 2023, lawmakers approved controversial legislation that replaced the self-regulated National Press Council with a committee whose members would be appointed rather than elected. **72** The new law stipulates that the king will appoint a committee president who will serve a five-year term and be granted immunity from removal and arrest. **73** The committee’s tasks include monitoring the online activity of journalists and foreign coverage on Morocco. Most significantly, however, it grants the committee the power to grant and revoke press credentials, a role previously diffused across several ministries and government bodies. The committee will also review proposals submitted by

individuals wishing to create a new media outlet, requiring a deposit of €100,000 (\$108,150). Critics and journalists have condemned the move, claiming it would tighten the media landscape, end self-regulation, and make it so only the wealthiest have access to journalism (see B5). **74**

During the coverage period, the government introduced new taxes that target online activity. YouTube content creators are now subject to a 10 percent tax on their earnings in addition to base income tax. **75**

Advertising revenue provided by the government or government-linked companies is not split evenly between independent and progovernment publications. **76** The Moroccan media sector includes a variety of “shadow” outlets, which are nominally independent but espouse progovernment sentiments. **77** They exist primarily to divert attention from other news portals and to compete for online advertising revenue and audience share. While there is no official evidence linking these outlets to a larger state strategy to counter the growth of dissenting voices, they receive large amounts of advertising, possibly in return for their progovernment bias (see B5). **78**

Powerful business entities, such as the three major telecommunications companies, are known to respond to state pressure to withdraw advertising money from news outlets that run counter to the state-owned media narrative. **79**

Articles 33 and 34 of the press code stipulate that in order to obtain press cards and benefit from state financial support, online news portals must acquire two types of authorization from two different bodies, each valid for one year and subject to annual renewal: from the Moroccan Cinema Center (CCM) to produce video content **80** and from the ANRT to host domain names under press.ma. **81** While these measures are in line with international practices, press freedom advocates have warned that the regulators may be subject to political pressure to deny outlets authorization based on their editorial stances. Creating a news site in Morocco is relatively complicated. **82** For example, the Ministry of Culture and Communication did not grant press cards to the directors of two important French-language news sites, Yabiladi and Le Desk, until May 2018. **83** According to the 2016 press code, practicing journalism in Morocco without those cards is illegal. It is unclear how the juridical terms of accreditation outlined in the press

code will be reconciled with the powers of the appointed committee replacing the National Press Council, which may wield the authority to grant and revoke press credentials.

**B7** 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

2/4

As a result of closures and advertising boycotts, the online media space has increasingly lacked diversity and independence. **84** International observers have described the landscape of online media in Morocco as “at risk” and “highly repressive.” **85** Despite this, social media remains largely open and diverse, although authorities have at times clamped down on certain types of social media expression (see C3).

Misinformation has increased in recent years, especially during politically sensitive times or around contentious issues, such as Israel and Palestine, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the disputed territory of Western Sahara. **86** Additionally, the rise of alt-right “Moorish” accounts on social media has contributed to the spread of misinformation and progovernment propaganda (see B5). In 2024, the Club of Accredited Journalists in Morocco (CJAM) hosted an event which discussed, among other topics, the difficulty of combating disinformation on social media. Ahmed Chami, president of the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE), expressed concern over a lack of fact-checking in published media. **87**

Certain topics and issues do not receive much coverage from mainstream online media. For example, local news about rural towns and provinces is excluded from national reporting. **88** News about King Mohammed VI remains largely limited to his public activities, with the exception of foreign outlets that have scrutinized his whereabouts and personal life. **89** Reporting on LBGT+ issues is still considered taboo, and information is typically only available on international news platforms and usually only in English or French, not Arabic, making it inaccessible to broad audiences. **90**

Journalists and activists describe a shrinking space for independent, diverse online content, partly due to the fear of surveillance or penalization by authorities. **91** In recent years, Moroccans living abroad have become more active in publishing

critical commentary, primarily on YouTube, and have drawn large audiences as self-censorship and independent media closures within Morocco have impacted the diversity of online content (see B4). **92** New policies have since been aimed at constraining the growing number of critical voices based abroad (see C2).

Online sites do not regularly host robust investigative journalism, in part because journalists working for state-friendly, traditional media outlets tend to be paid better. **93** Online outlets also receive unofficial directives to refrain from reporting on controversial issues or to disallow certain voices from being heard. In 2018, reports on King Mohammed VI's rumored divorce from his wife, Lalla Salma, were hardly covered by Moroccan media. In contrast, speculation about their divorce circulated freely in foreign media outlets. **94**

Rights groups have criticized the inconsistent implementation of the Law on the Right to Access Information. Article 10 of the law requires government institutions to make information available through electronic platforms, yet many government bodies do not consistently publish annual reports or update their websites. In fact, a government website cited in a corruption investigation, which was published by imprisoned Moroccan journalist Omar Radi prior to his arrest, has since been removed and relaunched with added restrictions on content that had previously been freely accessible to the public. **95**

**B8** 0-6 pts

<b>Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?</b>	<b>4/6</b>
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Internet users take advantage of various social media tools to educate, organize, and mobilize around a wide variety of issues, though authorities have taken steps to hinder some of these mobilization efforts in recent years.

Online users have faced official investigations or arrest after using social media to call for protests or boycotts, particularly against normalization with Israel (see C3).

**96** In May 2023, a court sentenced Nezha Majdi, a teacher, to three months in prison for circulating a video online that encouraged other teachers to protest an alleged case of sexual assault by a police officer. **97** Majdi was among 20 teachers sentenced to prison for their involvement in the protests. **98**

In February 2022, Abderrazak Boughanbour, the former president of the Moroccan League for the Defense of Human Rights, was summoned and investigated by security agents after sharing a Facebook post calling for protests.

**99** In March 2022, Brahim Nafai was interrogated by the police after calling for boycotts over rising fuel prices on Facebook. **100** Nafai's Facebook account was suspended, and the post was deleted (see B2).

Some online campaigns have succeeded in gaining international media attention and have at times resulted in concrete action, such as the release of jailed journalists. Several campaigns, such as #FreeKoulchi (Free Everyone), which began in 2014 and gained more momentum in recent years, called for the release of imprisoned journalists and activists. **101** In February 2022, online users organized a campaign to raise awareness for Rayan, a young boy who was stuck in a well. The hashtag #SaveRayan drew international media attention. **102**

A February 2020 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report highlighted the growing government crackdown on social media users in recent years. Students, activists, citizen journalists, and social media commentators who have criticized Moroccan authorities or encouraged Moroccans to protest socioeconomic injustices in the country were detained. **103**

## C. Violations of User Rights

**C1** 0-6 pts

**Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?**

**2/6**

The Moroccan constitution contains provisions designed to protect freedom of expression, but these principles are not defended by the judiciary. In addition, contradictions between the press and penal codes leave open loopholes that authorities have exploited to arrest and jail activists and journalists.

While the press code abolished prison sentences for journalists, articles in the penal code are still cited to justify their imprisonment, particularly articles that

deal with national security (see C2 and C3). Journalists must obtain a state-issued press card—a process that the state has used to exclude journalists critical of the government from the profession—and face greater risks of prosecution under the penal code for lacking such a card (see B6).

According to the 2011 constitution, which was passed by referendum to curtail public protests at the onset of the Arab Spring, all Moroccan citizens are equal before the law, and Article 25 guarantees all citizens “freedom of opinion and expression in all its forms.” <sup>104</sup> Although the constitution strengthened the judiciary as a separate branch of government, the judicial system in Morocco is far from independent. The king chairs the Supreme Council of the Judiciary and appoints several members; at least half are elected by fellow judges. <sup>105</sup>

In practice, the courts often fail to produce fair and balanced rulings, frequently basing their decisions on recommendations from the security forces. <sup>106</sup> During the previous coverage period, a number of observers, including the US State Department, Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), pointed to fundamental flaws and due process violations in the trials of journalists Omar Radi and Soulaymane Raissouni (see C3). <sup>107</sup> According to Amnesty International’s March 2022 report on Radi’s trial, the court failed to follow basic procedures and discarded important witness testimony and evidence, resulting in a verdict based on “a lack of impartiality in the judge’s reasoning.” <sup>108</sup>

**C2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?</b>	<b>1 / 4</b>
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Moroccan users may be punished for their online activities under the penal code, the antiterrorism law, and the press code. Article 218(2) of the antiterrorism law prescribes prison terms of two to six years and fines of 10,000 to 200,000 Moroccan dirhams (\$976 to \$19,530) for those convicted of condoning acts of terrorism through offline or online speech. <sup>109</sup> In addition to these laws, Moroccan authorities have also shifted their focus to criminalizing the online speech of Moroccans living abroad (see C3).

In the previous coverage period, Moroccan lawmakers introduced a new draft criminal law that includes strict penalties that could punish social media users who post “fake news” online. <sup>110</sup> Morocco’s minister of justice, Abdellatif Ouahbi, also asserted in 2022 that online defamation will be “strictly dealt with” with the penal code, rather than the press code, while discussing the ongoing measures to reform the penal codes. <sup>111</sup>

In recent years, authorities have increasingly used Articles 263 through 267 from the vaguely worded penal code, which criminalize “insults against public authorities, officials, and organizations,” to crack down on free speech. <sup>112</sup> These circumstances have prompted a number of popular online commentators, including Dounia Filali and Zakaria Moumni, to seek asylum or remain abroad. <sup>113</sup>

The 2016 press code received mixed reactions from free speech activists. <sup>114</sup> Unlike the 2002 press code, the newer law contains provisions that specifically apply to online media. <sup>115</sup> Most significantly, the code eliminated jail sentences for press offenses and replaced them with steep fines. Articles 71 and 72 authorize fines of up to 200,000 Moroccan dirhams (\$19,530) for publishing content considered to be disruptive to public order. The maximum fine is 500,000 Moroccan dirhams (\$48,820) in cases involving content that offends the military. The fines are largely unaffordable for Moroccan journalists, who may be imprisoned for failure to pay them. <sup>116</sup>

Under the penal code, which is currently undergoing a process of reform, journalists can still be jailed for speech offenses related to the monarchy, Islam, and Western Sahara, as well as threats to national security. The reform process remains largely state-led, without contribution from civil society. Defamation also remains a criminal offense.

**C3** 0-6 pts

**Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?**

**2/6**

Prominent journalists and activists continue to face arrest and prosecution for their online activities, as do ordinary social media users. Although the press code ostensibly protects journalists from being jailed for their work, the government has found other ways to punish them (see C2). In recent years, authorities have

charged a number of individuals with “insulting public officials and state institutions,” criminalized under Articles 263-267 of the penal code. **117** Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has stated that these penal code provisions are “being interpreted in an extremely elastic and draconian manner.” **118** Court cases are often repeatedly postponed, allowing authorities to avoid the international condemnation that might result from convictions and harsh sentences while still punishing online users.

Several online users received prison sentences for comments they made on social media during the coverage period. In April 2024, activist Abdul Rahman Zankad was sentenced to five years in prison for “insulting a constitutional institution” and “incitement” after criticizing Morocco’s normalization deal with Israel in a Facebook post. **119** He was also fined 50,000 dirhams (\$4,975). In July 2023, activist Said Boukyoud was also sentenced to five years in prison on charges of “offending the monarchy” for criticizing normalization with Israel in Facebook posts dating back to 2020. **120** Boukyoud made the posts while living in Qatar; upon hearing that an investigation was opened against him, he deleted the posts and his Facebook account. Despite this, he was apprehended at the airport upon his return to Morocco. **121**

In October 2023, authorities arrested journalist Abdelmajid Amyay for sharing articles that accused local officials of corrupt practices on his Facebook page. Amyay was charged with “publishing false news on social media for defamation purposes” and “insulting a state official for doing their job”; **122** he was released on bail after one night of detention, pending investigation. Amyay is the editor of a local news outlet, Chams Post, and previously worked with *Akhbar al-Yaoum*, described as Morocco’s “last independent newspaper,” which shut down in 2021 after its editor and publisher were arrested. **123** In April 2024, 20-year-old Dutch-Moroccan influencer Armani Goumani was arrested and placed under a travel ban after appearing on a blind-dating show on YouTube. Goumani, who wore a short skirt in the video, is the subject of an ongoing investigation over “public indecency,” which is criminalized under Article 483 of the penal code. If charged and found guilty, Goumani faces up to two years in prison. **124**

In July 2022, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published an extensive report detailing how activists and journalists face numerous speech-related charges, including “false news, insulting or defaming local officials, state bodies, or foreign heads of

state, and undermining state security or the institution of the monarchy.” **125** In September 2022, Moroccan political activist Hassan Bennajeh was summoned by authorities over an online post that criticized Morocco’s normalization of relations with Israel. The post, which was deemed to be “anti-Israel,” was reportedly taken down (see B2). **126**

In February 2023, human rights defender Rida Benotmane was arrested, charged, and sentenced to three years in prison for criticizing the government in Facebook posts and YouTube videos. **127** Following an appeal, his conviction was upheld and the sentence was reduced to 18 months. In April 2023, journalist Hanane Bakour was charged with “publishing fake news” after writing a Facebook post that criticized the ruling party, the National Rally of Independents. **128** Bakour was sentenced to a one-month suspended prison sentence and fined 500 dirhams (\$49.20). **129** In August 2022, online user Fatima Karim was sentenced to two years in prison for “undermining Islam” over content she posted on Facebook. **130**

In April 2022, activist Rabie al-Ablaq, who was previously arrested during the *Hirak Rif* movement, was sentenced to four years in prison over social media posts in which he criticized the king. **131** Human rights defender Saida El Alami was arrested in March 2022. In April 2022, she was sentenced to two years in prison for criticizing the authorities on social media. **132** Two other activists, Abderrazak Boughanbour and Brahim Nafai, also faced investigations for their online mobilization efforts (see B8). **133**

Several human rights groups have criticized Moroccan authorities for using false accusations of sexual assault to jail and silence journalists. **134** In July 2021, journalist Omar Radi received a six-year prison sentence on sexual assault and national security charges. **135** The government had targeted Radi for several years before this sentence was issued. **136** Similarly, in March 2022, journalist and activist Soulayman Raissouni was sentenced to five years in prison on sexual assault charges. Raissouni is known for his editorials that are often critical of the Moroccan security services. Radi and Raissouni were both released as part of a royal pardon in July 2024, after the coverage period. **137**

In a rare move, the three major security institutions in Morocco—the General Directorate for National Security (DGSN), the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DGST), and Morocco’s external intelligence agency, the General

Directorate of Studies and Documentation (DGED)—issued a joint statement in December 2020 announcing that they were pursuing charges against Moroccans living abroad. **138** The charges included “insulting public officials, spreading false information, and defamation.” Although the statement did not mention any specific names, progovernment media suggested that the charges were aimed at several well-known activists who publish content on social media platforms, namely YouTube.

**C4** 0-4 pts

<b>Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Anonymous and encrypted communication tools are generally accessible in Morocco, although some ambiguity remains regarding the legality of their acquisition and use. **139**

Article 13 of Law 53(05) of 2007 states that the “import, export, supply, operation or use of means or cryptographic services” are subject to prior authorization and outlines harsh penalties for noncompliance. However, the law does not specify whether the restrictions apply only to businesses or to private persons as well. **140** Decree 2-13-88137, adopted in 2015, shifted responsibility for authorizing and monitoring “electronic certifications,” including encryption, from the civilian-run ANRT to the military’s General Directorate for the Security of Information Systems (DGSSI). Civil society advocates saw the move as problematic, given the lack of accountability and oversight at military institutions. **141**

Purchasers of SIM cards must register their names and national identity numbers with telecommunications operators under a 2014 ANRT decision. **142** Unregistered SIM cards are shut down after one month.

**C5** 0-6 pts

<b>Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy?</b>	<b>1/6</b>
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Sophisticated surveillance tools have reportedly been deployed in Morocco, and Moroccan activists have identified these tools as among the state’s most

dangerous. **143**

In recent years, Rabat has reportedly used Pegasus—a spyware tool developed by the Israeli NSO Group and sold to governments—against a number of targets. **144** The list of targets includes Moroccan and international journalists, activists, French president Emmanuel Macron, and estranged members of the royal family. **145** Historian and activist Maati Monjib was arrested in January 2021 after having been targeted with Pegasus and sentenced to a year in prison on a separate case for his work on establishing the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism. **146** Several other journalists were targeted with Pegasus, including Taoufik Bouachrine, Omar Radi, and Soulimane Raissouni. **147** The targeted journalists have alleged that material gathered through surveillance was used to harass, threaten, and defame them in government-affiliated media outlets (see B5). In July 2021, an investigation published by the *Guardian* provided further evidence that Rabat had purchased Pegasus. **148**

In response to spyware use allegations, the Moroccan government filed defamation suits against several media outlets and journalists in Europe. In France, Morocco filed suits against *Le Monde*, Radio France, France Médias Monde, Mediapart, *L'Humanité*, Forbidden Stories, and Amnesty International. The French court threw out the suits in April 2023, stating that foreign states are barred from initiating defamation charges. **149** Similarly, after Spanish journalist Ignacio Cembrero stated that Morocco had targeted him with Pegasus, Morocco filed a lawsuit against him using an antiquated law criminalizing “boasting.” **150** In June 2023, Morocco was named in a resolution adopted by the European Parliament calling for the investigation of “spyware abuse.” The resolution stated it is likely that the Moroccan government has spied on high-profile European Union (EU) citizens, including heads of state. **151**

In a 2019 report, Amnesty International highlighted that prominent human rights defenders were targets of Pegasus. **152** According to this report, Maati Monjib and human rights lawyer Abdessadak El Bouchattaoui received malicious links through short-message service (SMS) messages that made their devices vulnerable to the spyware. According to Amnesty International, these attacks are part of a larger government strategy to silence critical voices. **153**

Reports, leaks, and interviews have revealed the government’s use of malware products from the Italian company Hacking Team to target Moroccan activists. **154** Previously, French news site Reflets.info had published an investigation of the Moroccan government’s purchase of spyware from the French company Amesys. **155**

In recent years, the Moroccan government has been investing millions of dollars in artificial intelligence (AI) technology, ostensibly to “promote economic growth and increase digitalization.” However, given poor safeguards against digital surveillance, these tools could be used to infringe on online users’ privacy. Although the constitution protects the right to privacy, surveillance of private communications is allowed with judicial approval. Furthermore, Morocco’s data protection law (see C6) includes broad language that could allow authorities to access personal user data, especially given the lack of transparent oversight over the intelligence services. **156**

**C6** 0-6 pts

<b>Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?</b>
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<b>2/6</b>
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Given the surveillance capabilities of the Moroccan state, authorities are likely able to obtain user data and monitor communications.

According to the National Control Commission for the Protection of Personal Data (CNDP), individuals maintain the right to approve or deny the processing of their personal data by both public and private entities, except in the following cases: if there is a legal obligation; if the individual is subject to a contractual agreement; if the individual is physically incapacitated or legally unable to give consent; if it is in the national interest; or if the party accessing the data holds a “legitimate interest.” **157** While Law 1-09-15 of 2009 leaves “exceptions” regarding access to people’s data, “the language is left open to interpretation,” according to Privacy International, which may yield inconsistencies in its legal application. **158**

In October 2021, authorities required citizens to use a mandatory COVID-19 vaccine pass to enter workplaces and public spaces, prompting several nationwide protests. **159** Those who did not comply could lose their jobs or face salary deductions. Although the CNDP has stated that the vaccine pass “does not involve

the risk of automatic tracking or access to personal information,” activists have condemned the decision given the potential for data collection and threats to personal data. **160**

At times, the Moroccan government requests user data from social media platforms. Facebook reported receiving 419 requests from the Moroccan government for user data between January and June 2022, and complying with 63.7 percent of those requests. **161**

**C7** 0-5 pts

**Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?**

**3/5**

Incidents of physical violence against users for their online activities are infrequent, but harassment and extralegal intimidation remain a major concern in the country.

Online trolls harass prominent journalists and human rights defenders. In December 2021, Mohammed Ziane, the former head of the Moroccan Bar Association and former minister delegate of human rights, was harassed by hundreds of “e-flies” who instigated a defamation campaign against him on Facebook. Some of the anonymous accounts disseminated fabricated sexual photos of Ziane on the platform. **162** Many of these accounts openly expressed their loyalty to the Moroccan government (see B5).

Women activists, journalists, and social media influencers frequently face online gender-based violence. During the coverage period, several activists spoke with the Rutgers Foundation about mounting cases of gender-based violence online, and they asserted that harassment has made it difficult for them to do their work and has forced some to self-censor (see B4). **163**

Social media users sometimes face violence for their online content. In May 2022, Loubna Mourid, a social media influencer who posts about gender discrimination, was violently attacked by a stranger in Berrechid. While the assailant’s motive was unclear, Facebook users speculated that Mourid was attacked over the content of her Instagram account, which has over 500,000 followers. **164**

Online progovernment outlets often conduct smear campaigns against government critics and activists to intimidate and silence them (see B5). **165** In October 2020, ChoufTV published intimate and private details about women’s rights activist Karima Nadir, including a copy of her underage son’s birth certificate. **166** Later in 2020, ChoufTV uploaded a video of Mohammed Ziane in which he can be seen undressing in a hotel room. **167** In February 2022, Ziane was sentenced to three years in prison under an array of charges, from “insulting public servants” to “sexual harassment.” **168** While this was initially paused on appeal, the three-year prison sentence was upheld in November 2022 and he remains in prison at the end of the coverage period. **169** In January 2021, in an interview with the *Economist*, human rights activist Fouad Abdelmoumni recounted how authorities used surveillance footage of him having sex with his partner in an attempt to silence and threaten him. **170**

Additionally, numerous accounts have been created by commentators on Twitter and Facebook, apparently with the sole purpose of harassing, intimidating, and threatening activists who criticize the authorities. Activists believe that these progovernment commentators are also equipped with direct or indirect access to surveillance tools, since they have often obtained private information about other users. **171**

Online campaigns of harassment have been launched against LGBT+ people. The attackers, highlighted in an April 2020 HRW report, specifically targeted gay and bisexual men who used same-sex dating apps by disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent. **172** This form of harassment can potentially lead to real-world attacks, persecution, discrimination, and the loss of employment or housing, especially since Moroccan law criminalizes same-sex sexual acts.

**C8** 0-3 pts

<b>Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?</b>	<b>2/3</b>
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*Score Change: The score increased from 1 to 2 because of a decrease in cyberattacks in recent years.*

In the past, online news portals that carry dissenting views have been subject to cyberattacks and hacking; however, there have not been many reports of these kinds of targeted attacks in recent years. **173**

Government websites have been targeted by alleged foreign cyberattacks. In February 2023, Morocco's state news agency, Maghreb Arab Press, was the target of a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack, which limited access to the agency's various sites. **174** It is unclear who perpetrated the attack.

In November 2021, the website of the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises was targeted by a cyberattack likely originating in Algeria. Attackers hacked the organization's website and placed a photo of the Algerian flag with a message reading "no peace between systems" on the main landing page. This attack came amid growing tensions between Algeria and Morocco. **175** Between July and October 2021, Lyceum, an Iranian hacker group, launched cyberattacks against Moroccan ISPs. The impact of the disruption on the ISPs and their customers is unclear. **176**

Previous reports and interviews with prominent activists point to an ongoing campaign by anonymous hacking groups to target perceived opponents of the establishment. Groups such as the Monarchist Youth, the Moroccan Repression Force, the Moroccan Nationalist Group, and the Royal Brigade of Dissuasion have hacked into activists' emails and social media accounts, often publishing offensive content in a bid to harm the activists' reputations. **177** In one case, human rights activist Abdellatif el-Hamamouchi expressed concern after being hacked via WhatsApp, even though the platform claims to offer end-to-end encryption. **178**

## *Footnotes*

- 1** "Internet outage in Marrakesh after deadly earthquake," Eurasia Media Network, February 2024, <https://eurasiamedianetwork.com/internet-outage-in-marrakesh-after-dead...>
- 2** "Digital Morocco," Datareportal, April 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-morocco?rq=Morocco>
- 3** "Morocco's Mobile and Fixed Broadband Internet Speeds," Speedtest, accessed July 2023, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/morocco#mobile>.

- 4 “The launch of 4G in Morocco should transform telecoms services,” Oxford Business Group, Accessed July 2021, [https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/rolling-out-launch-4g-likely-t....](https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/rolling-out-launch-4g-likely-t...)
- 5 “Note d’Orientations Générales pour le développement du secteur des télécommunications à horizon 2023 [General Guidance Note for the development of the telecommunications sector by 2023],” ANRT, Accessed July 2021, [https://www.anrt.ma/sites/default/files/nog-2023\\_-vf.pdf](https://www.anrt.ma/sites/default/files/nog-2023_-vf.pdf).

More footnotes



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#### *Country Facts*

Population

**37,460,000**

Global Freedom Score

**37/100** Partly Free

Internet Freedom Score

**54/100** Partly Free

Freedom in the World Status

**Partly Free**

Networks Restricted

**No**

Social Media Blocked

**No**

Websites Blocked

**No**

Pro-government Commentators

**Yes**

Users Arrested

**Yes**

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