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Freedom in the World - Morocco (2007)

Population:
31,700,000

Capital:
Rabat

Political Rights Score: 5
Civil Liberties Score: 4
Status: Partly Free

Overview

In January 2006, after two years of work and public hearings, Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER)—a government-mandated body that was unprecedented in the Arab world—submitted its final report to King Mohamed VI. It recommended several significant legal and institutional changes designed to prevent any repetition of the human rights violations witnessed under King Hassan II, Mohamed's father. The IER also incorporated a reparations program to offer compensation to the victims of state violence between 1956 and 1999.

Morocco gained independence in 1956 after more than four decades of French rule. The first postindependence monarch, King Mohamed V, reigned until his death in 1961. His son, King Hassan II, ruled Morocco until 1999. Most of Hassan's years in power, often referred to as the "years of lead," were marked by intense state repression. He was preoccupied with maintaining power, particularly after two failed coup attempts by renegade army officers in 1971 and 1972. Thousands of his opponents were either killed, tortured, exiled, imprisoned, or "disappeared." Also during his reign, Moroccan forces marched into Western Sahara and annexed the former Spanish territory, prompting the Algerian-backed Polisario Front to launch a pro-independence guerrilla campaign that became one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. A planned referendum on the future of Western Sahara, attached to a UN-monitored ceasefire agreement in 1991, has yet to take place. In the last few years of his life, Hassan made moves aimed at opening Morocco politically. Several political prisoners were released, independent newspapers began publishing, and a new bicameral parliament was established in 1997.

King Mohamed VI inherited the throne at age 35 following his father's death. Human rights and civil society activists, as well opposition leaders, had high hopes that the young king would expand the small measure of political freedom that his father had offered. However, the prospects for reform were limited by the country's serious economic and social ills. The majority of the population lived in poverty, and opportunities for economic growth and employment were slim. As in many other Arab states, Islamist groups gained public support by filling the vacuum and providing services to the poor.

Nevertheless, Mohamed won support by firing the feared Interior Minister Driss Basri, who had led much of the political repression under King Hassan. Exiled dissidents such as Abraham Serfaty were allowed to return to Morocco within months of Hassan's death.

Parliamentary elections held in 2002 were considered the most authentic since

independence. At least a dozen political parties, including Islamist-affiliated factions, won seats in the legislature. While the elections were praised, critics of the king, including independent journalists, were harassed and detained, and the country made little headway in solving the Western Sahara dispute.

In May 2003, local Islamist militants with links to al-Qaeda rocked Casablanca with a series of suicide bombings that targeted symbols of Morocco's Jewish community. The victims were mostly Moroccan civilians, and the government's response was immediate and harsh. An antiterrorism law was passed, but it has since been used to prosecute nonviolent opponents of the king. Local and international human rights groups charged that the authorities were using the opportunity of the attacks to pursue vocal government critics.

King Mohamed took a dramatic, unprecedented step in January 2004, when he inaugurated the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER). As the first truth commission in the Arab world, it was mandated with addressing the human rights abuses perpetrated against Moroccan citizens by the authorities from 1956 to 1999 and providing the victims with reparations. The commission held public hearings in which victims were given an opportunity to speak about the abuse they suffered. The IER was headed by Driss Benzekri, a political prisoner who spent 17 years in jail. In January 2006, the commission submitted its final report to the king, which included a series of recommendations for legal and institutional reforms designed to prevent a repetition of past abuses. Some critics of the IER have complained that even though victims have been given a chance to publicize their suffering and receive compensation, the perpetrators are not being held to account for their actions.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Morocco is not an electoral democracy. Although its parliamentary and municipal elections have been praised for being representative, most of the power in Morocco still lies in the hands of the king and his close advisers. The monarch can at any moment dissolve Parliament, rule by decree, and dismiss or appoint cabinet members. He sets national and foreign policy, commands the armed forces, and presides over the judicial system. One of the king's constitutional titles is "commander of the faithful," giving his authority a religious dimension.

The 1996 constitution reintroduced a bicameral legislature, which had existed briefly after independence but was replaced by a single chamber for the next 40 years. The lower house, the House of Representatives, has 325 directly elected members who serve for five-year terms. Members of the 270-seat upper house, the House of Advisers, are chosen by an electoral college to serve nine-year terms. The next parliamentary elections are slated for September 2007.

Morocco's opposition parties are not able to assert themselves given the king's extensive power. The strongest opposition to the monarch comes from moderate Islamist parties, particularly the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which has a large representation in Parliament. The Justice and Charity Association, a more overtly antimonarchical Islamist group, is banned from fielding candidates, as are all groups that challenge the ultimate authority of the king. Nadia Yassine, the de facto spokeswoman for the organization and the daughter of its leader, is currently on trial for saying that Morocco would survive if it did not have a king.

Corruption remains a serious problem in Morocco. The kingdom was ranked 79 out

of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index. Moroccan authorities have pledged to end the culture of impunity that pervades the security forces, and several senior security officials were fired in 2006 after being linked to drug dealers.

Morocco's independent journalists have carved out a space for critical journalism and are constantly attempting to break political and social taboos, but the authorities often have responded harshly. Morocco's 2002 press law amendments contain serious sentences for defamation and other press offenses. The government has promised to ease the restrictions, but has taken no action to date. The broadcast media, both radio and television, are dominated by the state and reflect the official government line. The authorities do not place specific restrictions on the internet, but it is not a major news medium in Morocco.

One of the pioneering publications of Morocco's independent press, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, run by publisher Aboubakr Jamaï and editor Ali Amar, suffered several attacks by the government or its supporters in 2006. In April, a Rabat appeals court upheld a 3 million dirham (\$330,000) defamation judgment against the weekly. The plaintiff in the case was the head of a Brussels-based think tank who had published a report on the status of Western Sahara. *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* had questioned the independence of the report, which largely mirrored the views of the Moroccan government on the issue. As was the case in many Arab and Muslim states, Morocco experienced fallout from the publication in Denmark of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. In February, after *Le Journal* and its weekly Arabic sister publication *Assahifa al-Ousbouiya* printed a photograph of a French newspaper that had republished the cartoons, the authorities bused protestors to *Le Journal*'s offices, and state television ran segments attacking the weekly. In other press cases, the independent weeklies *Tel Quel*, *Al-Ayam*, and *al-Ousbouia al-Jadida* were ordered by courts to pay crippling fines or damages for articles about a former parliamentarian's profession, the king's family, and an Islamist who questioned the need for a monarchy, respectively. The publications' editors also faced prison time.

Morocco's population is almost entirely Muslim. The small Jewish and Christian communities, which compose less than 1 percent of the population, are free to practice their religions without state interference.

University officials practice self-censorship when discussing sensitive topics like Western Sahara, the monarchy, and Islam. Islamist-dominated student unions, the best-organized groups on campuses, have worked to Islamize the curriculum, drawing complaints from secular and liberal professors.

While several independent human rights and civil society groups function in Morocco without much government interference, the authorities place limits on freedom of association in order to restrain Islamist groups. Morocco also regularly responds to protests in Western Sahara with arrests and alleged excessive force. In September 2006, 56 people were arrested, having been accused of being dangerous Islamists.

The law allows workers to establish and join trade unions. A new labor law enforced in June 2004 prohibits antiunion discrimination and prescribes limits the government's authority to intervene in strikes, which are allowed by the constitution but subject to a subsequent law requiring compulsory arbitration.

Morocco's judiciary, which has been criticized by local and international human rights groups, does not operate independently and rarely opposes the government or the king. Arbitrary arrests and torture still occur, but are not as common as during the reign of King Hassan II. The final report of the IER recommended several legal and institutional reforms, but it remains to be seen whether the changes will be adopted by the leadership. According to press reports, Morocco cooperates with the United States in its extraordinary rendition program, allowing accused terrorists to be brought into the country and interrogated. In a positive development, Morocco's security forces disbanded the riot police unit in October 2006 and planned to reassign its members to other formations. The antiriot unit, created in 2004, had been accused of abuse of power and implicated in the deaths of demonstrators and rioters in Western Sahara in 2005. The head of the security service was replaced in September 2006. The government is reportedly considering a bill that would abolish the death penalty.

Even though the Jewish community was the target of the May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, Moroccan Jews are well integrated into the larger society. One of the king's most trusted advisers, Andre Azoulay, is a Moroccan Jew who also served King Hassan. The government has also recognized the language and culture of the Berbers of the Rif region, in the northern part of the country.

Morocco has made positive steps toward removing legal barriers against equality for women, although women face a great deal of discrimination at the societal level. The constitution guarantees equality for women, and the 2004 family code gives women more rights in the area of marriage and divorce. The law also bans marriage for women younger than 18. In 2006, a woman was appointed as governor of a district outside Casablanca, marking the first such posting for a woman since independence.