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Freedom in the World - Morocco (2008)

Capital:
Rabat

Population:
31,700,000

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

Overview

Morocco in 2007 conducted its second parliamentary elections since King Mohamed VI ascended to the throne in 1999. Meanwhile, one of the deans of the independent press, Aboubakr Jemai, left the country after enduring sustained harassment from the authorities.

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 killed, tortured, arrested, or disappeared. This repression was particularly acute in the years following two failed coup attempts in 1971 and 1972. Also during Hassan's reign, Moroccan forces marched into Western Sahara and annexed all of the former Spanish territory, prompting the Algerian-backed Polisario Front to launch a proindependence guerrilla campaign that has become one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. 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 made moves aimed at opening up 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. 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. But for the first few years of his reign, little significant change transpired. Morocco was struggling economically, and the king feared the increased influence of Islamist-oriented political parties.

Mohamed did impress some critics by removing Interior Minister Driss Basri from his position, which he had held for two decades. Basri, a close confidante of King Hassan, had been identified as one of the leaders in repressing the king's opponents. He left Morocco after his dismissal, while exiled dissidents were permitted to return.

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 links to al-Qaeda rocked Casablanca with a series of suicide bombings that targeted symbols of Morocco's Jewish community. The victims were mostly 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.

In January 2004, King Mohamed took a dramatic, unprecedented step when he inaugurated the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER). As the first truth commission in the Arab world, it was tasked 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, who had spent 17 years as a political prisoner. 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. Critics also claim that in the two years since the IER's final report was published, few structural changes have been made and human rights abuses still occur on a regular basis, albeit on a lower scale.

In September 2007, Moroccans went to the polls to elect the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of Parliament. The voting drew the lowest turnout in Moroccan history, at 37 percent. The Socialist Union of People's Forces (USFP), previously the lead party in the ruling coalition, lost nearly a quarter of its seats, leaving it with 38. Its chief ally, the conservative Independence Party (Istiqlal), won a plurality of 52 seats. Opposition parties, which had criticized the elections' fairness, 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.

Also in 2007, Morocco and neighboring Algeria faced increased attacks from Islamist terrorist groups, raising fears of a more active North African terrorist network. A suicide bombing in March struck a Moroccan internet cafe, and the authorities' pursuit of the suspects led to a series of additional explosions. The government raised the terrorism threat levels later in the year based on information that a new attack was likely.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Morocco is not an electoral democracy. Most power is still held by the king and his close advisers. 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 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 four decades. The lower house, 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.

Given the concentration of power in the monarchy, opposition 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. Other, more overtly Islamist groups that criticize the monarchical system are harassed by authorities and not permitted to participate in the political process.

Corruption remains a serious problem. Morocco was ranked 72 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index. People with close ties to the monarchy receive preferential treatment in business and other matters. Despite the government's promises to address corruption, the situation has not changed substantially in recent years.

Morocco's journalists have boldly reported on taboo subjects over the years, but the state has responded harshly to journalists who are too critical of the king, his family, or Islam, leading to self-censorship. In addition to a restrictive press law, the government employs an array of economic and other, more subtle mechanisms to punish independent and opposition journalists. After years of promises about a new, liberal press law, the king proposed a draft in 2007. Though it was not adopted in 2007, the draft contained many of the punitive provisions of the old press code.

The government harassed critical journalists throughout 2007. In January, a court sentenced two journalists from the independent weekly *Nichane* to fines and suspended prison terms. The following month, in a major blow to independent journalism, Aboubakr Jamaï, one of the deans of Morocco's independent press corps, left the country to avoid government seizure of his assets and closure of his weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*. Jamaï's departure stemmed from a 2006 court decision in which he was ordered to pay over \$300,000 to the head of a Belgian think tank he was found guilty of defaming. The record-breaking award and the case itself were politically motivated, as Jamaï's publications had for years been unrelenting in their reporting on government corruption at all levels.

Prior to the parliamentary elections in the fall, authorities seized *Nichane* and its sister publication, *TelQuel*, after *TelQuel* published an editorial critical of the election process and the king's role in government. The editor of the publication also faced criminal charges. A number of other journalists also faced legal action and were sentenced to prison during the year. While no journalist was actually incarcerated at year's end, the government's actions cast doubt on its promises not to imprison journalists. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists met with Moroccan officials in April 2007 to raise concerns about the worsening state of press freedom. Top officials denied government involvement in legal proceedings against journalists, but Moroccan courts have long been known to lack independence from the political leadership.

Nearly all Moroccans are Muslims, but the small Jewish community is permitted to practice its faith without government interference. Some Moroccan Jews have achieved prominent positions in society.

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.

Civil society and independent nongovernmental organizations are quite active in

Morocco, and the government rarely interferes in their day-to-day work. The authorities do monitor Islamist groups and arrest suspected extremists. Freedom of assembly is not well respected, and protests in Western Sahara especially have been controlled through violence and threats.

Moroccan workers are permitted to form and join independent trade unions. According to the 2004 labor law, the government has only a limited ability to intervene in strikes. The law also prevents business owners from punishing workers who join and establish unions. However, child laborers, especially girls working as domestic helpers, are denied basic rights.

The judiciary is not independent. Courts rarely make decisions that violate official policy. The courts are also subject to government pressure and have been used as a weapon to punish government critics. Under the recommendations that accompanied the Equity and Reconciliation Commission's final report in 2006, the authorities were supposed to institute a series of legal and institutional reforms to prevent repetition of past human rights abuses. While the report and the overall work of the commission were bold, substantive changes have been slow in implementation, and some critics allege that the situation is unlikely to improve. Arbitrary arrest and torture still occur, but they are less common than under the previous king. The security forces are given greater leeway for abuse with detainees from Western Sahara.

The small Jewish community is well integrated into Moroccan society. Many Moroccans have a mixed Arab-Berber ancestry, and the government has officially recognized the language and culture of the Berbers.

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