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Freedom in the World 2010 - Morocco

Capital: Rabat

Population: 31,495,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Explanatory Note

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

Trend Arrow ↓

Morocco received a downward trend arrow due to the increased concentration of power in the hands of political elites aligned with the monarchy.

Overview

The Modernity and Authenticity Party, recently founded by a friend of King Mohamed VI, placed first in the June 2009 local elections, signaling the growing concentration of political power in the hands of the king and his allies. The balloting was accompanied by reports of vote buying and other forms of electoral manipulation. Also during the year, the government and courts continued to batter the independent press with arrests, fines, and jail sentences.

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. In 1975, Morocco and Mauritania occupied Western Sahara; after three years of fighting the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, a Sahrawi nationalist guerrilla movement, Mauritania pulled out of the territory, which was then annexed in full by Morocco. 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 in Morocco. Several political prisoners were released, independent newspapers began publishing, and a new bicameral parliament was established in 1997.

King Mohamed VI inherited the throne in 1999 at age 35. He declined to expand political

freedom much further in the first years of his reign, apparently aiming to check the increased influence of Islamist political parties. However, he removed longtime interior minister Driss Basri, who had led much of the repression under King Hassan, and allowed exiled dissidents to return to the country.

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

In May 2003, local Islamist militants with links to Al-Qaeda mounted a series of 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.

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

The 2007 elections for the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of Parliament, drew the lowest turnout in Moroccan history, 37 percent. The Socialist Union of People's Forces (USFP), previously the lead party in the ruling 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' 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.

El-Fassi appeared to have fallen out of favor by 2009, as former deputy interior minister Fouad Ali el-Himma, a close associate of the king, organized the Modernity and Authenticity Party (PAM) to contest local elections in June. The new party led the voting with more than 20 percent of local council seats, followed by Istiqlal with about 19 percent. Three other governing parties placed third, fourth, and fifth, leaving the PJD in sixth with less than 6 percent, though it reportedly did well in urban areas. 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.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Morocco is not an electoral democracy. Most power is held by the king and his close advisers. The monarch can dissolve Parliament, rule by decree, and dismiss or appoint cabinet members. He 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 lower house of Parliament, the Chamber of Representatives, has 325 directly elected members who serve for five-year terms. Members of the 270-seat upper house, the Chamber of Counselors, are chosen by an electoral college to serve nine-year terms. Thirty seats in the lower house are reserved for women, and under a rule that took effect in 2009, women are guaranteed 12 percent of the seats in local elections.

Given the concentration of power in the monarchy, the country's fragmented political parties and even the cabinet are generally unable to assert themselves. The most vocal opposition party that remains respectful of the monarchy is the PJD, which fared poorly

in local elections in 2009. The popular Justice and Charity Movement, an Islamist group, is illegal but generally tolerated by the authorities. Other, more explicitly nonviolent Islamist groups that criticize the monarchical system are harassed by authorities and not permitted to participate in the political process.

Despite the government's rhetoric on combating widespread corruption, it remains a structural problem, both in public life and in the business world. Morocco was ranked 89 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The authorities have stepped up repression of the country's vigorous independent press in recent years, using the restrictive press law and an array of economic and other, more subtle mechanisms to punish critical journalists, particularly those who focus on the king, his family, or Islam. In an indication of their extreme sensitivity, government officials in August 2009 banned or destroyed copies of France's *Le Monde* daily, the French-language weekly *Tel-Quel*, and the Arabic weekly *Nichane* that reported the results of an opinion poll on the monarchy, despite the fact that 91 percent of respondents said they had a favorable view of the king. In September, police shuttered the daily *Akhbar al-Youm* for publishing a cartoon on the wedding of one of Morocco's princes; the courts later upheld the closure and imposed suspended jail sentences and fines on an editor and a cartoonist at the paper. In October, a court sentenced *Al-Michael* editor Driss Chahtan to a year in jail after his paper allegedly published "false information" about the king's health. Two *Al-Michael* reporters received shorter sentences, and an editor and reporter for *Al-Jarida al-Oula* received suspended sentences that month for a similar infraction.

Among several other court rulings against independent newspapers during the year, the Supreme Court in September upheld a 2006 defamation judgment against the trailblazing *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, meaning the weekly's publishers owed over \$350,000 in damages to the head of a Belgian think-tank. *Le Journal* had alleged that a report by the research group on Western Sahara mirrored the Moroccan government's position. The case was seen as a politically motivated bid to destroy the paper without directly involving the government.

The state dominates the broadcast media, but residents have access to foreign satellite television channels. The authorities occasionally block websites and internet platforms, while bloggers and other internet users are sometimes arrested for posting content that offends the monarchy. In December 2009, a blogger and an internet cafe owner were sentenced to four months and one year in jail, respectively, for disseminating information about student protests.

Nearly all Moroccans are Muslims, but the small Jewish community is permitted to practice its faith without government interference. However, Moroccan authorities are growing increasingly intolerant of social and religious diversity as reflected in arrest campaigns against Shiites and Muslim converts to Christianity. Authorities have also detained several members of the Moroccan Alternative Movement for Individual Freedoms for planning a public "picnic" during the month of Ramadan to protest against the law that forbids eating during fasting hours. While university campuses generally provide a space for open discussion, professors practice self-censorship when dealing with sensitive topics like Western Sahara, the monarchy, and Islam.

Freedom of assembly is not well respected, and protests in Western Sahara especially have been controlled through violence and threats. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Moroccan authorities confiscated passports of Sahrawi activists in 2009 and prevented some from leaving the country. Civil society and independent nongovernmental organizations are quite active, though the authorities monitor Islamist groups and arrest suspected extremists. While NGOs in Morocco operate with more freedom than in many other Arab states, groups that offend the government face harassment.

Moroccan workers are permitted to form and join independent trade unions, and the

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

The judiciary is not independent, and the courts are regularly used to punish opponents of the government. In the so-called Belliraj case, 35 people were arrested in February 2008 and convicted in July 2009 of forming a terrorist group, plotting attacks, and raising funds through criminal activities. However, according to HRW, the alleged acts were limited to one assassination attempt in 1996 and robberies committed a decade ago. The defendants claimed that confessions and statements in the case were made under torture, and that they were simply members of political parties that the government wanted to eliminate.

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

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

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

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

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