



Freedom in the World 2013 - Morocco

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2013 Scores

Status: Partly Free
Freedom Rating: 4.5
Civil Liberties: 4
Political Rights: 5

Explanatory Note

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

Overview

Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane of the Justice and Development Party took office in January 2012. Economic instability and unrest deepened during the year, due in part to high fuel and food costs and an economic system dominated by the king and other elites. The February 20 Movement staged nationwide protests throughout the year, including in July and September.

Morocco gained independence in 1956 after more than four decades of French rule. The first ruler after independence, King Mohamed V, reigned until his death in 1961. His son, Hassan II, then ruled the country until his death in 1999. Thousands of his political opponents were arrested, tortured and killed, while many simply disappeared.

In 1975, Morocco and Mauritania occupied Western Sahara. After three years of fighting the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, a Sahrawi nationalist guerrilla movement, Mauritania withdrew from the portion it claimed. Morocco then annexed the territory in full. A planned referendum on Western Sahara's future – attached to a UN-monitored ceasefire agreement in 1991 – never took place.

In the last few years of Hassan's life, several political prisoners were released, independent newspapers began publishing, and a new bicameral parliament was established. King Mohamed VI, who inherited the throne in 1999, declined to expand political freedom significantly early in 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, and more than a dozen political parties participated, though independent journalists and other critics of the king were harassed and detained.

In May 2003, local Islamist militants with purported links to Al-Qaeda mounted a series of deadly suicide bombings, targeting symbols of Morocco's Jewish community in Casablanca. The government responded by enacting a harsh antiterrorism law, which 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 recommending forms of reparation for the victims. The commission, which featured public testimony from victims, submitted its final report in 2006, including a series of recommendations for legal and institutional reforms designed to prevent future abuses. Critics of the IER complained that it did not hold perpetrators accountable, and that its recommendations did not lead to major structural changes. Moreover, the authorities were intolerant of further discussion of past abuses. In June 2008, a court in Rabat ordered the private daily *Al-Jarida al-Oula* to stop publishing IER testimony.

In the 2007 elections for the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of Parliament, the conservative Independence Party (Istiqlal) won a plurality, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) placed second, and the Socialist Union of People's Forces (USFP), previously the lead party in the governing coalition, came in third.

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

After naming a commission to draft a new constitution in response to the protests, the king presented the proposed document in June 2011. It preserved most of the monarch's existing powers, but would require him to choose the prime minister from the party that won the most seats in parliamentary elections, and consult the prime minister before dissolving Parliament. Other provisions included giving official status to the Berber language, calling for gender equality, and emphasizing respect for human rights. Although the February 20 movement rejected the changes as insufficient, the main political parties encouraged voters to approve the document in a July referendum, and it reportedly passed with over 98 percent of the vote.

Parliamentary elections were held in November 2011, resulting in a victory for the opposition PJD, which took 107 of the 395 seats in the lower house. Istiqlal placed second with 60 seats, followed by the National Rally of Independents with 52, the Modernity and Authenticity Party (PAM) with 47, the USFP with 39, the Popular Movement with 32, the Constitutional Union with 23, the Party of Progress and Socialism with 18, and ten small parties dividing the remainder. After the PAM's poor showing, PAM leader Fouad Ali el-Himma resigned and joined the palace as an advisor to the king.

Abdelilah Benkirane of the PJD was named prime minister, and he formed a coalition government with Istiqlal, the Popular Movement, and the Party of Progress and Socialism in January 2012. Although Morocco continued to be one of the more stable nations in the region in 2012, economic instability and unrest deepened as the year progressed due to the economic problems in Europe, high fuel and food costs, and an economic system dominated by the king and his economic and political elite.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Morocco is not an electoral democracy. Most power is held by the king and his close advisers. Even under the 2011 constitution, the monarch can dissolve Parliament, rule by decree, and dismiss or appoint cabinet members. He sets national and foreign policy, commands the armed forces and intelligence services, and presides over the judicial system. One of the king's constitutional titles is "commander of the faithful," giving his authority a claim to religious legitimacy. The king is also the majority stakeholder in a vast array of private and public sector firms; according to *Forbes*, Mohammed VI is worth \$2.5 billion, making him one of the world's wealthiest people.

The lower house of Parliament, the Chamber of Representatives, has 395 directly elected members who serve for five-year terms. Sixty of these seats are reserved for women, and 30 for men under age 40. Members of the 270-seat upper house, the Chamber of Counselors, are chosen by an electoral college to serve nine-year terms. Under a rule that took effect in 2009, women are guaranteed 12 percent of the seats in local elections.

Given the concentration of power in the monarchy, the country's fragmented political parties are generally unable to assert themselves. The PJD, which won the 2011 parliamentary vote, has long been a vocal opposition party, even as it remained respectful of the monarchy. The Islamist Justice and Charity Movement is illegal, though it is generally tolerated by the authorities. Other Islamist groups 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 problem, both in public life and in the business world. In 2012 a new book by journalists Catherine Graciet and Éric Laurent, *Le Roi Prédateur*, leveled sharp charges of corruption at the palace. Morocco was ranked 88 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although the independent press enjoys a significant degree of freedom when reporting on economic and social policies, the authorities use restrictive press laws and an array of financial and other, more subtle mechanisms to punish critical journalists, particularly those who focus on the king, his family, the status of the Western Sahara, or Islam. Rachid Nini, editor of the popular daily *Al-Massae*, was sentenced in June 2011 to a year in jail on charges of spreading misinformation after publishing articles on alleged corruption involving the royal palace and PAM leader Fouad Ali el-Himma. The paper had also called for the repeal of the 2003 antiterrorism law. Nini was released in April 2012 and resigned from the paper, migrating to the internet. Other journalists have also been harassed, including Hamid Naïmi, who has investigated corruption and the marginalization of the Berber population in the northern Rif region, and Mohamed Sokrate, a blogger who has written sympathetically about the February 20 Movement and advocates secularism. The state dominates the broadcast media, but residents have access to foreign satellite television channels. The authorities occasionally disrupt websites and internet platforms, while bloggers and other internet users are sometimes arrested for posting content that offends the monarchy.

Nearly all Moroccans are Muslims. While the small Jewish community is permitted to practice its faith without government interference, Moroccan authorities are growing increasingly intolerant of social and religious diversity, as reflected in arrest campaigns against Shiites, Muslim converts to Christianity, and those opposed to a law enforcing the Ramadan fast.

While university campuses generally provide a space for open discussion, professors practice self-censorship when dealing with sensitive topics like Western Sahara, the monarchy, and Islam.

Freedom of assembly is not always respected, though frequent demonstrations by unemployed graduates and unions are generally tolerated. The February 20 Movement also holds rallies on a periodic basis; notable protests in 2012 included a demonstration in Casablanca on July 22 and in Rabat on September 23. The protests were largely peaceful, and included demands that activists be

released from prison. Reduced in numbers from its height in 2011, the movement was deemed illegal by a Casablanca judge in July 2012. Although such protests often occur without incident, activists say they are harassed outside of public events.

Civil society and independent nongovernmental organizations are quite active, but the authorities monitor Islamist groups, arrest suspected extremists, and harass other groups that offend the government. Moroccan workers are permitted to form and join independent trade unions, and the 2004 labor law prevents employers from punishing workers who do so. However, the authorities have forcibly broken up labor actions that entail criticism of the government, and child laborers, especially girls working as domestic helpers, are denied basic rights.

The judiciary is not independent, and the courts are regularly used to punish opponents of the government. Arbitrary arrest and torture still occur, though they are less common than under King Hassan. The security forces are given greater leeway with detainees advocating independence for Western Sahara, leading to frequent reports of abuse and lack of due process.

Many Moroccans have a mixed Tamazight (Berber) ancestry, and the government has officially recognized Tamazight language and culture.

Women continue to face significant discrimination at the societal level. However, Moroccan authorities have a relatively progressive view on gender equality, which is recognized in the 2011 constitution. The 2004 family code has been lauded for granting women increased rights in the areas of marriage, divorce, and child custody, and various other laws aim to protect women's interests.

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