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Morocco

Polity: Traditional monarchy and limited parliament **Political Rights:** 5

Civil Liberties: 5

Status: Partly Free

Economy: Capitalist-statist

Population: 29,700,000

PPP: \$3,546

Life Expectancy: 69

Religious Groups: Muslim (98.7 percent), Christian and other (1.3 percent)

Ethnic Groups: Arab and Berber (99 percent), other (1 percent)

Capital: Rabat

Ten Year Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status):

1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
6,5,PF	5,5,PF	5,5,PF	5,5,PF	5,5,PF	5,5,PF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	5,5,PF	5,5,PF

Overview

While Morocco held the freest and fairest elections of its history in 2002, the conspicuous absence of a major Islamist party on the ballot, low voter turnout, and lack of transparency in the formation of a new government underscored how little things have changed politically. Nevertheless, the harsh crackdown on dissent that had continued throughout 2001 was eased.

After 44 years of French rule, Morocco gained independence as a hereditary monarchy headed by King Mohammed V in 1956. After his death five years later, the throne passed to his son, Hassan. Although the constitution provided for multiparty democratic institutions, power remained centralized in the hands of the king, who faced substantial threats to his rule. In 1971 rebellious guards massacred more than 100 people at his birthday party, and the following year Moroccan fighter planes attacked his 727 jet. The withdrawal of Spanish forces from Western Sahara in 1975 provided Hassan with an opportunity to assert his nationalist credentials while distracting the attention of his restless military. Thousands of young Moroccans were imprisoned or sent into exile as the government ruthlessly suppressed serious political dissident. Hundreds disappeared, never to be heard from again. Like many other Arab states, Morocco began a limited process of political liberalization after the 1991 Gulf war.

Hassan died in July 1999, and the throne went to his son, Mohammed, who inherited a country with severe economic and social problems. More than 20 percent of the population was unemployed, nearly half remained illiterate, and a third lived below the poverty line. A huge government debt threatened social spending during the growth of grassroots support for Islamists, who have provided social services to sectors of the population traditionally neglected by the government. A steady outflow of educated Moroccans to Europe sapped the economy of skilled labor and technical expertise.

Upon assuming the throne, King Mohammed VI launched a more extensive program of economic and political liberalization. One of his first acts was to dismiss Driss Basri, the hard-line interior minister whose power was second only to that of

Mohammed V for more than 20 years. Thousands of political prisoners were released, families of those who died in captivity were given financial compensation, and exiled dissidents were allowed to return. Initiatives were launched to reduce the rampant corruption that had long plagued the civil service. Restrictions on public freedoms were eased. An initiative to advance women's rights was launched in 2000 but dropped after hundreds of thousands of Muslims, including many veiled women, took to the streets in protest.

The new mood of relative tolerance led opposition activists to intensify demands for far-reaching political reform and accountability for past abuses. The young king panicked in December 2000, when thousands of secular and Islamist opposition supporters joined together in nationwide demonstrations to mark the annual UN Human Rights Day. Around 800 people who took part in the protests were arrested in the weeks that followed, though most were released or acquitted in 2001.

The independent media came under severe pressure throughout 2001. Human rights conditions improved in 2002, and the king honored promises to hold free and fair elections in September. A number of measures were taken to fight the rampant corruption that had plagued past elections. A proportional representation system was introduced to prevent tribal leaders from buying votes (voters now vote for political parties, rather than individual candidates). A new single-ballot paper was introduced, displaying logos of the parties to assist the illiterate, in place of color-coded ballots that undermined voting secrecy. Voters' fingers were dipped in permanent ink to prevent repeat voting. However, while the elections were procedurally sound, only 52 percent of registered voters bothered to show up. According to a poll taken on the eve of the elections, 9 out of 10 Moroccans could not identify either the name or basic ideological orientation of any political party.

Interior Minister Driss Jettou was appointed prime minister. The 25-member coalition government he unveiled in December was little different than its predecessor. Indeed, 19 members were carried over from the previous cabinet. The cabinet's size and diffuse ideological composition were widely criticized as an indication that the palace did not want an effective decision-making body. There were widespread complaints that politicians did not consult sufficiently within their respective parties before making decisions.

Another central component of the political reform process—the anticorruption campaign—also stalled in 2002. Following a judicial investigation into the alleged diversion of more than \$1 billion from a state bank, Credit Immobilier et Hotelier (CIH), to cronies of the late King Hassan, the Special Court of Justice ordered the arrest of former CIH president Moulay Zine Zahidi and 15 senior CIH executives in October. Zahidi went into hiding and gave an interview with the Casablanca-based *Le Journal*, claiming that several of the bank's poor decisions regarding well-connected donors (such as its decision to buy back a tourist resort from Morocco's ambassador to the United Nations for \$3 million) were ordered by unspecified higher-ups in the Moroccan government. The two reporters who filed the interview were detained and interrogated.

Political reforms have been intended first and foremost to bolster the domestic legitimacy and international standing of King Mohammed VI, not to devolve decision-making power from the palace to the politicians. Concerns that the king's unwillingness to relinquish his grip on power will further inflame Islamist militancy have become widespread among secular liberals, and contributed to a rift within the royal family between King Mohammed and his 38-year old cousin, Prince Moulay Hisham. The latter began openly criticizing the government in 2001, warning of potential political instability and hinting that the principle of primogeniture should not dictate the royal succession in Morocco. Hisham was forced to leave the country in January 2002 after a stream of reports in the pro-government media accused him of conspiring to launch a coup.

Although Morocco is not known for the kind of Islamist violence that wracked neighboring Algeria, the palace moved against radical Islamists following the arrest in May 2002 of three Saudi members of al-Qaeda allegedly plotting to attack NATO warships in the Straits of Gibraltar. Up to 20 Moroccans accused of providing them

with financial assistance were reportedly arrested. Over the summer, the authorities launched a crackdown on obscure radical Islamist groups (dubbed "militant Salafists" by the authorities) in low-income districts of Casablanca, Tangiers, and other cities.

Muted public reaction to the crackdown suggests that the militant Islamist current may be neither as popular nor as threatening as some foreign media have claimed. The real threat to the palace is that the stalled reform process and economic stagnation will cause mainstream Islamists and leftists to join together and call for real democracy. Apart from the elections, the only major development in 2002 that gave a clear boost to popular support for the king was his marriage in March to Salma Bennani, an engineer for a mining company. The wedding was said to be the first between a member of the royal family and a commoner in Moroccan history.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Moroccans' right to change their government democratically is limited. The constitution not only grants the king supreme executive power, but accords him religious legitimacy as "commander of the faithful." Since the king appoints the prime minister and selects the cabinet in consultation with the prime minister, the most powerful ministries have always been entrusted to staunch allies of the palace. The king can dissolve the legislature at his discretion and rule by decree during legislative adjournments. He also appoints the governors of Morocco's 16 provinces. Legislative powers are shared by the king and a bicameral legislature, consisting of the directly elected, 325-member Chamber of Representatives (Majlis al-Nuwwab) and the Chamber of Advisors (Majlis al-Mustasharin), whose members are selected by local assemblies, professional syndicates, trade unions, and other bodies. The government can be dissolved by a vote of no confidence in both houses of parliament. Unlike previous elections, the 2002 parliamentary elections were procedurally free and fair.

Arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detention, and torture continued to be practiced by the security forces, though the number of abuses declined in 2002. The capture of three members of al-Qaeda went unreported in the press for nearly a month as interrogators allegedly tortured the suspects. Several militant Islamists arrested over the summer claimed to have been tortured in custody. On November 8, the French daily *Le Monde* reported that unidentified assailants in Paris attempted to assassinate Hisham Mandari, an exiled member of the late King Hassan's security service who has threatened to expose corruption in the royal family.

The judiciary is subject to corruption, bureaucracy, and governmental interference. Although judicial reform has been identified as a high priority of the government, progress has been slow. Judges have been referred to disciplinary panels for punishment as a result of investigations into alleged corruption and misconduct, and a number have been fired.

Freedom of expression remains restricted. Broadcast media are mostly government controlled and reflect official views, though foreign broadcasting is available via satellite and a large independent print media flourishes. While critical reporting on most topics is tolerated, journalists risk imprisonment for violating taboos on issues such as the monarchy, Islam, and Moroccan claims to Western Sahara. The government periodically confiscates copies of publications that cross these lines. A new media law promulgated in 2002 reduces jail terms stipulated by the 1973 press code, makes it easier to launch a publication, and requires the government to give reasons for confiscations, but the Moroccan Press Union condemned the measure for not eliminating penal sanctions entirely.

The number and severity of punitive actions against journalists and publications declined somewhat in 2002. In January, a journalist for the weekly *Al-Ayyam* was arrested and briefly detained after he visited Islamist prisoners at the central prison of Kenitra. In February, two journalists were given suspended prison sentences on appeal for defaming the Moroccan foreign minister and the authorities seized issues

of the French weekly VSD, which contained unflattering coverage of the king. In May the authorities seized 8,000 copies of the quarterly journal Wihhat Nadhar, which contained the transcript of a speech by Moulay Hisham. In the weeks prior to the September 2002 elections, the authorities carried out a campaign to close down Islamic bookshops suspected of carrying extremist literature.

Internet access is prohibitively expensive for most Moroccans, but generally unrestricted. Since April 2001, however, the authorities have blocked access to several Islamist Web sites, most notably the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO). Shortly after his appointment in December 2002, the incoming minister of communications, Nabil Benabdallah, pledged not to ban or confiscate any newspaper during his term.

Freedom of association is limited. Organizations must receive approval from the Interior Ministry in order to operate legally. The establishment of several proposed political parties has been blocked in recent years, and membership in two major Islamist groups (the JCO and Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya) is explicitly prohibited. The Interior Ministry requires permits for public gatherings and has forcibly dispersed demonstrations in the past, but peaceful protests were generally tolerated in 2002. A pro-Palestinian protest in Rabat attracted well over 500,000 participants in April.

Morocco's heavily unionized formal (business) sector includes 17 umbrella federations, some of which are aligned with political parties and all of which are subject to political pressure. Workers may bargain collectively and strike.

Although the Moroccan constitution states that "men and women are equal in rights," this equality is limited to the political sphere. New electoral legislation introduced in 2002 set aside a fixed bloc of 30 parliamentary seats for women. Many women pursue careers in the professions or in government, but they face restrictions in advancement. The personal status code discriminates against women in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Domestic violence is common, and the law is lenient toward men who kill their wives for alleged adultery.

Islam is the official religion, and almost 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The government closely monitors mosque activities. Christians and Jews can worship freely, though Baha'is are not free to practice their religion. One of the king's top advisors and two army colonels are Jewish.

Some 25 percent of Moroccans speak the Berber language, Tamazight, as their primary language, but Arabic is the only officially recognized language. In 2001, King Mohammed announced the establishment of a royal cultural institute that would work toward integrating Tamazight into public education and ruled that translators must be available at trials of Berbers and expatriates who do not speak Arabic.

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Freedom House is a clear voice for democracy and freedom around the world. Founded nearly sixty years ago by Eleanor Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie, and other Americans concerned with the mounting threats to peace and democracy, Freedom House has been a vigorous proponent of democratic values and a steadfast opponent of dictatorships of the far left and the far right.

Non-partisan and broad-based, Freedom House is led by a Board of Trustees composed of leading Democrats, Republicans, and independents; business and labor leaders; former senior government officials; scholars; writers; and journalists. All are united in the view that American leadership in international affairs is essential to the cause of human rights and freedom.

Over the years, Freedom House has been at the center of the struggle for freedom. It was an outspoken advocate of the Marshall Plan and NATO in the 1940s, of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, of the Vietnam boat people in the 1970s, of Poland's Solidarity movement and the Filipino democratic opposition in the 1980s, and of the many democracies that have emerged around the world in the 1990s.

Freedom House has vigorously opposed dictatorships in Central America and Chile, apartheid in South Africa, the suppression of the Prague Spring, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, and the brutal violation of human rights in Cuba, Burma, China, and Iraq.

It has championed the rights of democratic activists, religious believers, trade unionists, journalists, and proponents of free markets. In 1997, a consolidation took place whereby the international democratization training programs of the National Forum Foundation were incorporated into Freedom House.

Today, Freedom House is a leading advocate of the world's young democracies, which are coping with the debilitating legacy of statism, dictatorship, and political repression. It conducts an array of U.S. and overseas research, advocacy, education, and training initiatives that promote human rights, democracy, free market economics, the rule of law, independent media, and U.S. engagement in international affairs.

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