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**Freedom in the World - Morocco (2005)****Political Rights:**

5

Civil Liberties:

4*

Status:

Partly Free

Population:

30,600,000

GNI/Capita:

\$1,170

Life Expectancy:

70

Religious Groups:

Muslim (98.7 percent), Christian (1.1 percent), Jewish (0.2 percent)

Ethnic Groups:

Arab-Berber (99.1 percent), other (0.9 percent)

Capital:

Rabat

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Ratings Change

Morocco's civil liberties rating improved from 5 to 4 due to the adoption of a new family law that will provide greater rights to women and preliminary indications of the law's implementation.

Overview

As Morocco slowly recovered from the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings, it moved ahead in 2004 with a new family code providing women with more rights and initiated fresh attempts at addressing past human rights violations. Activists generally welcomed these developments, but an antiterrorism law in place since the bombings continued to erode human rights protection as thousands of Islamists suspected of ties to the 2003 bombings were still detained and hundreds of people from the Western Sahara territory remained "disappeared." An attack in Spain in March 2004 by a group of mostly young Moroccans drew attention again to the threat of homegrown terrorists.

Moroccan independence dates from 1956, when power passed to King Muhammad V following 44 years of French colonial rule. King Hassan II ascended the throne five years later on the death of his father. In 1975, Morocco laid claim to the Western Sahara following the withdrawal of Spanish forces from the territory; the status of the territory remains in dispute and is a source of tension in the country. Hassan II oversaw much of Morocco's modern development, but power remained concentrated entirely in the hands of the king. He introduced political reform in the 1990s, establishing a directly elected lower house of parliament, and moved to improve the human rights situation.

King Muhammad VI came to power in July 1999 after the death of his father. While Morocco had made tentative steps toward political and economic liberalization, Muhammad inherited a country with severe social and economic problems. More than 20 percent of the population was unemployed, nearly half remained illiterate, and a third lived below the poverty line. Mounting public debt hampered the government's ability to provide social services. Islamist charitable networks quickly filled the gap,

providing services and gaining support at the grassroots level.

King Muhammad has continued to pursue political opening. Soon after he ascended the throne, he dismissed Interior Minister Driss Basri, long considered one of the most powerful men in Morocco and the embodiment of the corruption and repression that marked the monarchy. Thousands of prisoners were released, and the king allowed exile opposition figures to return home.

In 2002, Morocco held parliamentary elections that were widely considered to be

the most representative in the country's history. The elections led to a parliament with a significant Islamist presence and in which 10 percent of members were women.

Five suicide bombings in May 2003 that killed 45 people and injured another 100 shattered Morocco's sense of stability. Victims were primarily Moroccans, and the targets included visible symbols of Morocco's Jewish community. The 14 attackers were Casablanca residents, with suspected links to al-Qaeda, the terrorist network. The Moroccan government's response to the attacks was swift and harsh: thousands were arrested and courts handed down death sentences and long prison terms.

Less than a year later, a series of bombs exploded on passenger trains in Madrid in March 2004 focused international attention on North Africa. The attacks killed nearly 200 people and wounded almost 2,000. Most of the attackers were Moroccans, apparently linked to the Casablanca bombers and to al-Qaeda. Spain's new prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who took office days after the blasts, visited Morocco in April, and the two countries agreed to fight terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration. In the summer of 2004, France proposed the formation of a defense partnership between Europe and Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. In addition, U.S. president George W. Bush designated Morocco a major non-NATO ally in the fight against terrorism.

The king expanded efforts at improving the country's human rights record. In December 2003, he announced the creation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to document abuses perpetrated under the previous regime and to compensate victims. The commission is headed by Driss Benzikri, a former political prisoner. Most human rights activists welcomed the move, but critics said it did not provide for bringing past violators to justice.

In early 2004, Morocco enacted reforms to its personal status law, known as the *Mudawana* and based in Islamic law. The new code aimed at rectifying gender inequality by raising the marriage age to 18 and strengthening women's rights to divorce. A similar effort was suspended in 2000 when Islamists organized massive protests, but since the 2003 attacks, Moroccan Islamists have kept a low profile.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Moroccans' right to change their government democratically is limited. The monarch retains ultimate authority and may appoint or dismiss cabinet members, dissolve parliament, and rule by decree. Legislative powers are shared by the king and a bicameral legislature that includes a directly elected lower house. The 2002 parliamentary elections and municipal elections held in 2003 were regarded as the most representative in the country's history.

Opposition parties remain weak. The government crackdown on Islamic extremists has deterred moderate Islamist elements from political participation. The single most effective opposition party, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), was pressured by the government into running only a few candidates in the municipal elections. In an effort to improve its image, the party elected a new leader in 2004, known for his moderate views. Secular opposition parties have yet to make significant inroads at the grassroots level.

Morocco was ranked 77 out of 146 countries surveyed in the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. In a July 2004 report, Transparency

Morocco, a network of civil society organizations, described instances of bribery of officials, including the judiciary. Proceedings were subsequently initiated against 14 judges, two of whom were dismissed and six retired.

Press freedom remains somewhat restricted. There is a lively press, but under a 2002 law, journalists are subject to prison sentences and fines for defamation and libel, especially regarding the royal family, Islam, and the Western Sahara. In January 2004, the king pardoned six journalists, two of whom had been sentenced to up to three years in jail. Notable among them was Ali Lmrabet, editor of a French-language weekly, *Demain*, and an Arabic weekly, *Douman*, convicted of insulting the king and challenging the territorial integrity of the state. Government prosecution of journalists resumed, however, and in April 2004, Anas Guennoun, editor of the weekly *Al Ahali*, was sentenced to 10 months in jail for defamation. In June, two Norwegian journalists were expelled for attempting to meet a Western Sahara activist. In September 2004, a court sentenced Anas Tadili, the editor of the weekly *Akhbar al-Ousbouaa*, to one year in jail for libel, after he wrote about a government minister's homosexuality. Broadcast media are mostly government-controlled. Foreign broadcasting is available via satellite. The government did not generally impede Internet access, but blocked the website of the Justice and Charity Organization, a religious group barred from political activity.

Islam is the official religion of Morocco, and almost 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Morocco's Jewish community, while quite small (approximately 5,000), has been able to worship freely. However, the 2003 bombings largely targeted Jewish community sites.

Academic freedom was somewhat restricted, with no open debates allowed on the monarchy, Islam or the status of the Western Sahara. Government informers monitored Islamist activity on campuses, and the interior ministry approved the appointment of rectors.

Freedom of association is somewhat limited. Nongovernmental organizations need government permission to operate, but in practice few groups have been rejected or subjected to funding controls in place. A royal pardon in January 2004 included some 20 political prisoners and detainees, among them activists working on human rights in the Western Sahara. Freedom of assembly is limited and public gatherings require Interior Ministry permission, although peaceful protests are generally tolerated.

The law allows workers to establish and join trade unions. A new labor law enforced in June 2004 prohibits anti-union discrimination and prescribes the government's authority to intervene in strikes, which are allowed by the Constitution but subject to a subsequent law requiring compulsory arbitration of disputes. Most strikes during 2004 were of 24 to 48 hours duration and involved, among others, the teachers' unions, bank officers, and health professionals.

The judiciary lacks independence and is subject to corruption and bribery. The current antiterrorism law allows suspects to be held for up to 12 days without being charged, broadens the definition of terrorism, and expands the number of crimes punishable by death. The justice minister said in May 2004 that more than 2,000 people had been charged, some 900 convicted, and 17 sentenced to death. Amnesty International reported that the practice of torture had widened in Morocco as part of the antiterrorism campaign and charged that the trials of terror were not conducted fairly.

While the new Equity and Reconciliation Commission is to investigate and document disappearances and other abuses that occurred between 1956 and 1999, it lacks the authority to take to court alleged perpetrators and can only provide information and recommend compensation to the victims or their relatives. It also cannot compel government institutions to cooperate with it. Further complicating its mandate is the fact that most of the "disappeared" are from the Western Sahara; it is consequently difficult for their relatives to trust an officially appointed body. Nevertheless, the commission has consulted international experts on truth and reconciliation and is to present a record of the cases by April 2005.

Moroccan women are guaranteed equal rights under the constitution, but the reality has been one of marked inequality. The 2004 amendment to the family code fueled hopes for improvement. The amendment raises the marriage age from 15 to 18 for women, cedes greater rights to women in the areas of marriage and divorce, and makes polygamy difficult. However, women's rights groups warned that in order for the changes to succeed, judges needed to be trained and women must be informed about their new rights. Many NGOs and government departments had begun mobilizing to adopt the new Mudawana. Domestic violence is common, but the Mudawana may make it easier for women to obtain a divorce. A new labor code makes it illegal for children under age 15 to be employed. Child labor has been common, especially the employment of young girls as unpaid domestics or as prostitutes.