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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Morocco

PARTLY FREE

37

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 13 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 24 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

37 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Note

The numerical scores and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Western Sahara, which is examined in a separate report. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the [report methodology](#) and [FAQ](#).

Overview

Morocco holds regular multiparty elections for Parliament, and reforms in 2011 shifted some authority over government from the monarchy to the elected legislature. Nevertheless, King Mohammed VI maintains dominance through a combination of substantial formal powers and informal lines of influence in the state and society. Many civil liberties are constrained in practice.

Key Developments in 2020

- Moroccan authorities instituted mass-gathering restrictions, arrested individuals accused of spreading purportedly false information, and maintained internal movement restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, though some restrictions were relaxed in May. Infections and deaths rose beginning in October, and the World Health Organization recorded 437,000 cases and 7,355 deaths at year's end.
- Several journalists who were previously surveilled or targeted by authorities were detained during the year. *Akhbar al-Youm* editor in chief Soulimane Raissouni was accused of sexual assault in May, Le Desk reporter Omar Radi was accused of rape and collaborating with foreign intelligence services in July, and *Al-Quds al-Arabi* contributor Maati Monjib was accused of money laundering in late December; all three remained in custody at year's end.
- In December, Morocco normalized relations with Israel under an agreement supported by the United States, which recognized Morocco's claim over the territory of Western Sahara that month. Police in Rabat, meanwhile, prevented protesters from demonstrating over the agreement.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

Constitutional reforms in 2011 required the king to appoint the prime minister from the party that wins the most seats in parliamentary elections, but the reforms nevertheless preserved nearly all of the king's existing powers. The monarch can disband the legislature, rule by decree, and dismiss or appoint cabinet members.

After the 2016 parliamentary elections, political disagreement over the composition of a new government consumed more than five months. In 2017, King Mohammed VI used his royal prerogative to appoint Saad Eddine al-Othmani, a former Party of Justice and Development (PJD) foreign minister, as prime minister, replacing Abdelilah Benkirane, also of the PJD. However, technocrats loyal to the palace obtained key economic portfolios, and the PJD was similarly excluded from the “strategic ministries” of interior, foreign affairs, justice, and Islamic affairs.

The Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) left the governing coalition in October 2019, and a new cabinet was announced later that month. The palace engineered a cabinet that was reduced in size, from 39 to 23 ministers, and numerous technocrats were appointed, though some of the most important ministries remained essentially unchanged.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 2 / 4

The lower house of Parliament, the Chamber of Representatives, has 395 directly elected members who serve five-year terms. Of these, 305 are elected from 92 multimember constituencies. The remaining 90 are elected from a single nationwide constituency, with 60 seats reserved for women and 30 for people under the age of 40. Members of the 120-seat upper house, the Chamber of Counselors, are chosen by an electoral college—made up of professional, labor, and business organizations as well as local and regional officials—to serve six-year terms.

In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the PJD placed first with 125 seats in the Chamber of Representatives, followed by the royalist Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) with 102. Both increased their share of seats compared with 2011. Istiqlal (Independence) fell by 14 seats to 46; the National Rally of Independents declined by 15 seats to 37; the Popular Movement dropped 5 seats to 27; and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces fell by 19 seats to 20. The PPS won 12 seats, a decline of 6. Official turnout was 43 percent of registered voters, lower than the 45 percent in 2011 and representing only 23 percent of eligible voters.

Authorities placed limits on some foreign electoral observers, and instances of vote buying and other irregularities were reported, but the elections provided a degree of choice to voters.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 2 / election management bodies? 4

The constitutional and legal framework allows for competitive legislative elections, but the transparency of the process is not guaranteed. Elections are overseen by the Interior Ministry, with some participation by the Justice Ministry, rather than an independent electoral commission. Approximately three million Moroccans live abroad, and the electoral laws made it exceedingly difficult for voters outside of Morocco to cast their ballots in 2016.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these 2 / competing parties or groupings? 4

Morocco has a vibrant multiparty system, but parties are generally unable to assert themselves relative to the power of the palace. Of the two largest parties, the PJD polls strongly in urban areas, while the PAM dominates rural areas. Smaller parties tend to be unstable and are sometimes built around the personalities of their leaders. Venerable parties like Istiqlal, the USFP, and the RNI, meanwhile, have lost influence.

Justice and Charity (Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan) is an illegal Islamist movement that does not participate in elections. Nevertheless, it enjoys widespread support, and authorities largely tolerate its activities. More recent social movements such as the reformist February 20th Movement, which emerged from the 2011 Arab Spring protests, and *Hirak Rif*, a campaign against inequality that began in Morocco’s largely Amazigh Rif region in 2016, enjoy considerable popular support, but have also faced government repression.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 1 / elections? 4

Prior to 2011, the PJD was a vocal opposition party, and its entry into government showed that the system allowed some rotation of power. However, this opportunity is permanently limited by the presence and influence of the monarchy, both formally and in practice. Although the PJD won a plurality of seats in the 2016 elections, it struggled to form a governing coalition, and its ability to exercise power has been undermined by the king’s support for parties loyal to the palace.

The October 2019 reshuffle was led by the monarch and resulted in a smaller cabinet with a large share of palace-approved technocrats, leaving elected political parties with less representation and authority.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political 1 / sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4

The constitution and informal practice give the king overwhelming influence over political affairs, including government formation. The monarch and his circle of advisers and associates—known in Morocco as the *Makhzen* (“central storehouse”)—wield enormous private economic power that can be used to shape political outcomes through patronage networks.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other 1 / relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

The political system features universal suffrage, but parties based on religious, ethnic, or regional identity are prohibited, and the concerns and interests of women and the Amazigh population are not adequately addressed.

At least 40 percent of the population is Amazigh, and the majority of Moroccans have Amazigh roots. Amazigh elites enjoy access to the monarchy and also have their interests represented in Parliament, but the bulk of the population is socially and economically marginalized. Recent unrest in Al Hoceïma, the surrounding Rif region, and other cities across Morocco stemmed in large part from inequities experienced by many Amazigh residents and their inability to find redress for their grievances through the political system.

A system of reserved seats for women is meant to encourage their participation in the electoral process at the national and local levels, partly offsetting traditional social pressures that deter such engagement. Women won a greater share of parliamentary seats in 2016, taking 21 percent of the lower house, compared with 17 percent in 2011. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in party and cabinet leadership positions.

The 2019 conviction of journalist Hajar Raissouni for supposedly having an illegal abortion and engaging in extramarital sex underscored the need for greater political mobilization on behalf of women’s rights, prompting a nationwide petition calling for an end to outmoded and discriminatory laws. The ongoing Outlaws campaign continued to gather signatures in its efforts to trigger criminal-code changes through 2020.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies 1 / of the government? 4

While elected officials are duly installed in government, their power to shape policy is sharply constrained by the king, who sets domestic and foreign policy and commands the armed forces and intelligence services, and the *Makhzen*. Royal commissions tend to wield more power than ministries.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Corruption is rife in state institutions and the economy. Despite official rhetoric about combating corruption, the palace and government have a mixed record on enforcement. The Central Authority for the Prevention of Corruption was strengthened in 2015 and was renamed the National Commission for Integrity and Anti-Corruption. In late 2018, the king appointed the commission’s leader after the post remained vacant for three years.

While profound reforms are needed to combat corruption, progress has been slowed by a lack of political will, low institutional capacity, and the influence of elites who benefit from the status quo.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Overall transparency is limited. Civil society leaders have faulted a controversial 2018 access to information law for provisions that criminalize “misuse” of government information or “distortion of content.” The government publishes budget and financial information online, and public officials—including parliamentarians, judges, and civil servants—are required to declare their assets. However, the monarchy itself, with its vast array of economic interests, is not subject to these rules.

Transparency is sometimes lacking with respect to the king’s health, a subject which is considered taboo. In September 2019, the palace made a rare statement on Mohammed VI’s health, reporting that a pending overseas trip was cancelled due to a respiratory ailment. In June 2020, the state news agency reported that Mohammed VI had undergone heart surgery.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

The state dominates the broadcast media, but affluent Moroccans have access to foreign satellite television channels. Although the independent press enjoys a significant degree of freedom when reporting on economic and social policies, the authorities use a number of financial and legal mechanisms to punish critical journalists, particularly

those who focus on the king, his family, the status of Western Sahara, or Islam. The authorities also occasionally disrupt websites and internet platforms. Bloggers are harassed for posting content that offends the monarchy, although many online activists operate anonymously.

Several journalists, all of whom have previously faced government surveillance or prosecution, were detained by authorities during 2020. In May, *Akhbar al-Youm* editor in chief Soulaïmane Raïssouni, the uncle of Hajar Raïssouni, was detained on suspicion of sexual assault, and remained in detention at year’s end. In July, Omar Radi, a reporter at news site Le Desk, was arrested on charges including rape and working with foreign intelligence agencies. Observers doubted the veracity of the claims against Radi, who remained in detention at year’s end, noting the authorities’ use of sexual assault charges to stifle criticism and the government’s previous surveillance and targeting of Radi. In December, *Al-Quds al-Arabi* contributor Maati Monjib, who was also harassed and surveilled by the authorities in the past, was detained on suspicion of money laundering.

Media freedoms were also restricted by COVID-19-related measures. In March 2020, the Culture Ministry halted the printing and distribution of newspapers. Authorities also began arresting individuals accused of spreading purportedly false news that same month.

Human rights groups continued to criticize the government’s efforts to suppress reporting on the restive Rif region in 2020.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Nearly all Moroccans are Muslims, and the king, identified as “commander of the faithful” in the constitution, has ultimate authority over religious affairs. Imams are required to obtain state certification, and mosques are monitored by the authorities. The government operates a well-financed training program for imams and female religious counselors tasked with promoting a state-sanctioned version of “moderate Islam,” which some critics charge is also intended to promote political quiescence.

Despite deep societal prejudices, the small Jewish community is permitted to practice its faith, though many synagogues are unmarked. The Christian community, which numbers approximately 50,000, also experiences prejudice. Christian marriages are not legally recognized by the government.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Universities generally provide a more open space for discussion, but professors practice self-censorship when dealing with sensitive topics like Western Sahara, the monarchy, and Islam. Salafists, adherents of a fundamentalist form of Islam, are closely monitored in universities. Periodic violence between university student groups, often stoked by Morocco’s political, ethnic, and sectarian differences, inhibits the right to peaceful student activism.

In 2019, Parliament passed a law reestablishing French as the language of instruction for math, science, and other technical subjects, in part to help prepare students for French-language instruction at universities. Some opponents expressed preference for Chinese or English to improve Morocco’s global economic competitiveness, while traditionalists preferred the reinforcement of Moroccan Arabic.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 2 / 4

There is some freedom of private discussion, but state surveillance of online activity and personal communications is a serious concern, and the arrests of journalists, bloggers, and activists for critical speech serve as a deterrent to uninhibited debate among the broader population. In 2019, Amnesty International reported that spyware was used to surveil journalist Maati Monjib, and reported that similar tactics were used against Omar Radi in June 2020.

The government also sought to restrict social media activity with a draft law that the cabinet adopted in March 2020. The law would have allowed for the censorship of material that is considered a security threat, penalties against service providers, and prison sentences and fines for social media users who call for consumer boycotts. The draft was temporarily withdrawn in May after its publication sparked an outcry.

In June 2020, the Health Ministry launched the *Wiqaytna* (Our Protection) COVID-19 tracing application. *Wiqaytna*’s launch sparked concerns over user privacy, with civil society groups noting the relative weakness of existing data-protection legislation.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Freedom of assembly is restricted. The authorities sometimes use excessive force and violence to disperse protests, and harass activists involved in organizing demonstrations that express criticism of the government.

The government suppressed protests in the Rif region that erupted after the 2016 death of Al Hoceïma fish vendor Mohcine Fikri. The ensuing Hirak Rif protest movement against corruption and economic deprivation gained support from activists across Morocco, but those protests were dispersed in 2017. Nasser Zefzafi and other protest leaders were arrested that year and received 20-year prison sentences in 2018, while 50 other activists received shorter sentences. While the charges were upheld by an appeals court in 2019, Zefzafi and several other Hirak Rif organizers were pardoned by Mohammed VI in July 2020.

Despite existing and COVID-19-related assembly restrictions, major protests occurred in 2020. In late February, several thousand protesters marched in Casablanca, calling for an expansion of human rights and the release of imprisoned Hirak Rif participants. In September, demonstrators in Rabat rallied against the normalization of Israeli ties with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. In December, police in Rabat moved to prevent protests after the Moroccan government announced the normalization of ties with Israel.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 2 / 4

While civil society organizations are active, they are subject to legal harassment, travel restrictions, intrusive surveillance, and other impediments to their work. The authorities routinely deny registration to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with links to Justice and Charity or that assert the rights of marginalized communities.

The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), one of Morocco's most prominent NGOs, is frequently targeted by the government. The authorities have cancelled numerous AMDH events in recent years, and are known to impede its efforts to rent space and open bank accounts. In April 2020, AMDH vice president Omar Naji was charged with defamation for criticizing the COVID-19-related confiscation of street merchants' goods in the city of Nador, while AMDH member Siham el-Makrini was arrested for incitement in May after commenting on teachers' rights in a social media post. Both individuals were acquitted in November.

Amnesty International has been prohibited from carrying out research in Morocco since 2015.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

Workers are permitted to form and join independent trade unions, and the 2004 labor law prevents employers from punishing workers who do so, but there are undue legal and employer restrictions on collective bargaining and strikes. The authorities sometimes forcibly break up labor-related protests. Unions are often closely affiliated with political parties.

Teachers held several strikes over promotions and pay in 2020. Contract teachers held a five-day strike in November over promotions and pay deductions, while full-time teachers called for a strike later that month over promotions. Contract teachers held another strike in late December, claiming that the government reneged on a previous agreement to offer them full-time posts. Postal workers, meanwhile, announced a strike over working conditions at the end of December.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

The court system is not independent of the monarch, who chairs the Supreme Council of the Judiciary. In practice, the courts are regularly used to punish perceived opponents of the government, including dissenting Islamists, human rights and anticorruption activists, and critics of Moroccan rule in Western Sahara.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process is often neglected. Law enforcement officers frequently violate legal and procedural safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention, and many convictions rely on confessions that may have been coerced. Pretrial detainees are reportedly held beyond a one-year limit in practice, and there are no provisions in the law allowing for pretrial detainees to challenge their detentions in court. Some suspects, particularly those accused of terrorism, are held in secret detention for days or weeks before formal charges are filed.

The convictions of Hirak Rif protesters were reportedly based on confessions obtained through torture, which the defendants all retracted during trial. Among other flaws in the process, the defendants were denied prompt access to lawyers after their arrests, and defense lawyers faced obstacles in accessing and presenting trial evidence.

The case against Hajar Raissouni also illustrated serious due process deficiencies. She and her fiancé were arrested in August 2019 and sentenced to a year's imprisonment that September on charges of extramarital sex and obtaining an illegal abortion, in what was considered a politically motivated prosecution. Raissouni, her fiancé, and her doctors, who were also prosecuted, received royal pardons that October.

The 2020 cases against Omar Radi and Soulaïmane Raissouni were also regarded as politically motivated. Radi, for example, faced prolonged interrogation sessions in June, and was placed into pretrial detention in July, even though his lawyers argued that such treatment should not have applied in his case.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4**

Cases of excessive force by police and torture in custody continue to occur. A number of the protesters detained in recent years have reported being beaten and injured during arrest, and some have been subjected to prolonged solitary confinement while awaiting trial.

Prisons often suffer from overcrowding, and prisoners faced heightened risks of contracting COVID-19. In April 2020, Mohammed VI pardoned over 5,600 prisoners and ordered their release in an effort to limit the spread of the coronavirus. Nevertheless, a prison in Drâa-Tafilalet Province became the site of at least 68 infections later that month.

Terrorism remains a threat to physical security in Morocco, though the authorities have had some success in preventing attacks. In July 2019, three assailants, who were avowed supporters of the Islamic State militant group, were sentenced to death for murdering two Scandinavian women while they hiked in the Atlas Mountains in 2018. However, Morocco has not carried out an execution since 1993.

F4 0-4 pts**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4**

Constitutional reforms in 2011 granted official status to Tamazight languages, which have been promoted in schools along with Amazigh culture. Nevertheless, Amazigh and other communities that do not identify with the dominant Arab culture tend to face educational and economic disadvantages. Civil society groups that promote Amazigh rights have faced government interference.

Gender equality was also recognized in the 2011 constitution, but women continue to face significant discrimination at the societal level and are underrepresented in the labor force. LGBT+ people face harsh discrimination and occasional violence. Same-sex sexual relations can be punished with up to three years in prison.

The government has granted temporary residency permits to refugees and migrants as part of an effort to regularize their status and provide them with basic services, which earned Morocco international praise in recent years. However, many registered refugees living in Morocco still do not possess residency or work permits. Authorities notably launched a crackdown on refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in 2018, arresting thousands of people in a series of raids that year and subsequently abandoning them near the Algerian border. The arrests were condemned by international rights groups for violating international law, as well as the basic human rights of those affected.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights**G1 0-4 pts****Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, 2 / employment, or education? 4**

Moroccan law guarantees freedom of movement and the ability to change one's place of employment or education, but in practice poor economic conditions and corruption limit these rights. Widespread bribery, nepotism, and misconduct within the educational sector constrain merit-based advancement.

Movement was also restricted under COVID-19-related measures, with the government instituting a lockdown in March 2020. While some measures were relaxed in May, some internal movement restrictions were maintained throughout the rest of the year.

G2 0-4 pts**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 2 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4**

Well over a third of the land is collectively owned by tribes and managed by the Interior Ministry, and in recent years it has been subject to private development without fair compensation to previous occupants. Moreover, under tribal rules of inheritance, women cannot hold the rights to occupy and use such lands, leaving them more vulnerable to displacement. Ordinary inheritance rules also put women at a disadvantage, generally granting them half the property of an equivalent male heir.

Private business activity is hampered in part by the dominant role of the king and his family. Among other assets, Mohammed VI has a majority stake in the National Investment Company, a massive conglomerate with businesses in virtually every economic sector, including mining, tourism, food, banking, construction, and energy.

G3 0-4 pts**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, 2 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4**

The 2004 family code granted women increased rights in the areas of marriage, divorce, and child custody, though a number of inequities and restrictions remain, and implementation of the code has been uneven.

All extramarital sexual activity is illegal, which deters rape survivors from bringing charges, among other repercussions.

Domestic violence is rarely reported or punished due to social stigma, though Moroccan NGOs offer support to domestic-violence survivors. A 2018 law criminalized domestic violence and forced marriage, and imposed more stringent penalties on those convicted of rape. Although the law was considered a step forward, critics faulted the legislation for failing to outlaw spousal rape, not providing a clear definition of domestic violence, and not mandating the government to provide greater support for survivors. In July 2020, a network of NGOs reported that domestic violence increased during the country's COVID-19 lockdown.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Poverty is widespread, and economic opportunities are scarce for a large portion of the population. The deaths of two coal miners working in dangerous conditions in the town of Jerada in 2018 sparked protests and underscored chronic problems related to inequality and government neglect of certain industries and communities.

Child laborers, especially girls working as domestic helpers, are denied basic rights and are frequently abused by their employers. A 2018 labor law meant to protect young women employed as household workers requires employers to use written contracts, sets a minimum working age of 18 (after a five-year phase-in period during which 16- and 17-year-olds are allowed to work), mandates a day off each week, and sets a minimum wage. Rights groups criticized the legislation for failing to provide support to reintegrate domestic workers into society, and for permitting girls under 18 to work until 2023.

A 2016 law criminalized human trafficking; existing measures had defined and banned only some forms of trafficking and left many victims unprotected. Immigrant laborers, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, are often employed informally and subject to significant exploitation.

ecoi.net summary:

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
[T \(Telefon\)](#) +43 1 589 00 583
[F \(Fax\)](#) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
Imprint & Disclaimer
F.A.Q.
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