Morocco

PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 23 / 30 (↑1)
(o=BEST, 30=WORST)

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT: 25 / 40 (↓1)
(o=BEST, 40=WORST)

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT: 18 / 30
(o=BEST, 30=WORST)

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE: 66 / 100
(o=BEST, 100=WORST)

QUICK FACTS
Population: 34,121,000
Net Freedom Status: Partly Free
Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free
Internet Penetration Rate: 57.1%

Overview
The media in Morocco are severely restricted. A range of laws either directly limit media freedom or are used to do so. Journalists face regular harassment and cannot report in certain areas, especially Western Sahara. The regime uses advertising and subsidies, as well as aggressive financial harassment, to repress critical media coverage. However, the population has some access to independent viewpoints through the internet, satellite broadcasts, and private radio.

**Key Developments**

- The government responded to accusations of corruption, mismanagement, and rights violations with a number of high-profile criminal defamation prosecutions in 2015, which resulted in heavy fines and suspended jail sentences for several journalists and publications.

- Authorities arrested and deported French, Dutch, and Italian reporters and placed travel bans on several Moroccan journalists, forbidding them from leaving the country and impeding their professional work.

- In December, the lower house approved a new press code and two new media laws that would introduce restrictions on the practice of journalism; however, some elements of the laws, such as the establishment of a self-regulatory body and the decriminalization of defamation, were praised by media advocates.

**Legal Environment: 23 / 30 (↑1)**

Morocco’s 2011 constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but its vague language enables wide latitude for interpretation and hinders enforcement of
media protections. The press law prohibits criticism of the monarchy and Islam and effectively bars critical coverage of certain taboo subjects, including the royal family and the official status of Western Sahara. Defamation is a criminal offense punishable by up to one year in prison and/or fines of up to approximately $12,000. Morocco witnessed an unusual wave of defamation convictions throughout 2015. In June, the news website Goud was ordered to pay the king’s private secretary more than $50,000 after it republished an article that accused him of corruption. Also in June, journalist Hamid el-Mehdaoui was handed a four-month suspended prison sentence and heavy fines for an article he wrote that attributed the death of an imprisoned activist to custodial torture. In July, Rachid Niny, director of the Al-Akhbar newspaper, was ordered to pay more than $40,000 to transportation minister Aziz Rebbah and his associates over an article in which Niny alleged that a contractor working for the Transportation Ministry had used substandard materials on a highway construction project. In November, Taoufik Bouachrine, editorial director of the Akhbar Al-Yaoum newspaper, was sentenced to a two-month suspended prison sentence and more than $150,000 in fines after he alleged that a Finance Ministry official had improperly advocated for a certain piece of legislation.

The 2003 antiterrorism law provides for heavy criminal penalties including fines and jail time for vaguely worded offenses that include advocacy, support, or incitement to terrorism. In 2013, journalist Ali Anouzla was arrested and detained for two months under the law after he wrote an article that included a link to a YouTube video in which an extremist group criticized Morocco’s King Mohamed VI and called for Moroccan youth to wage jihad. The case has been repeatedly postponed and remained unresolved by the end of 2015.

In July 2015, Moroccan police disrupted a training session for citizen journalists being given by senior journalists and activists, confiscating their equipment. In November, seven of the trainers were put on trial on charges of
threatening national security and failing to disclose foreign funding in connection with the program, which was sponsored by the Dutch press freedom organization Free Press Unlimited. They face up to five years in prison. Their cases remained unresolved at year’s end.

Journalists are often imprisoned on trumped-up criminal charges that are not explicitly press related. In March 2015, for example, press freedom advocate Hicham Mansouri was sentenced to 10 months in prison for adultery. At the time of his arrest, Mansouri was investigating alleged state surveillance of human rights activists.

In December 2015, Morocco’s governing council approved a draft of a new Press and Publications Code following negotiations between the Communications Ministry and journalists, publishers, and advocates. The draft included a number of improvements to current law, including decriminalization of defamation. Publishers had initially expressed strong opposition to a number of other provisions, including heavy increases in civil fines, the possibility of permanent revocation of journalists’ press cards, and potential suspension of newspapers before the resolution of criminal proceedings. However, the publishers were eventually persuaded to support the revised code, which is expected to be debated in parliament in 2016.

In June 2015, the government sent a new draft of long-delayed access to information legislation to parliament for consideration. While critics noted its improvement over a version considered last year, they also highlighted a number of shortcomings, including the narrow scope of institutions covered under the law, the requirement of a justification for an information request, and restrictions on the reuse or republication of requested information by third parties. The bill had not yet been passed by year’s end.

The king appoints the president and four of eight board members of the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication, which issues broadcast licenses
and monitors content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. The prime minister appoints two additional board members, and the presidents of the two chambers of parliament each appoint one of the remaining members. Both local and foreign publications must also obtain accreditation in order to operate and publish, and can be suspended or censored if their content is deemed a threat to public order.

In addition to the new press code, in December the House of Deputies approved a law establishing a new self-regulatory media body, the National Press Council, whose duties will include mediating disputes that arise within the industry, the issuance of press cards, and levying of penalties for journalists and publications that commit ethical transgressions. The council will be composed of representatives of journalists, publishers, and civil society groups. Another new law established new guidelines related to the practice of journalism, mandates that journalists receive university training, and forbids those with certain criminal convictions from joining the profession. Currently, journalists can benefit from many public and private institutions that provide journalism training, and barriers to entry to the profession are limited. Syndicates defend journalists’ rights and interests.

**Political Environment: 25 / 40 (↓1)**

King Mohamed VI and his government continued to wield considerable control over the editorial content of domestic broadcast media in 2015. The government holds the authority to appoint the heads of all public radio and television stations.

Although the internet is used as a platform for journalism and the dissemination of news, the government exerts control over online media through the press law as well as censoring content on certain websites,
including news sites and blogging platforms. The state also occasionally cracks down on those who produce critical online content on issues such as the monarchy, religion, or official corruption. In May 2015, the British watchdog Privacy International released a report documenting extensive monitoring of human rights activists and journalists by the Moroccan intelligence services. The Interior Ministry allegedly filed suit against the group and its Moroccan subsidiary in retaliation for the report.

Self-censorship is widespread, and journalists tend to stay within unofficial red lines to avoid heavy fines, prison sentences, or extralegal intimidation and physical violence in retribution for their stories. Some journalists continue to push the boundaries of permissible coverage and report on sensitive subjects such as the military, national security, religion, and sexuality, but most have moved outside Morocco to escape government harassment and surveillance.

Foreign publications are widely available in Morocco, but the foreign media are not immune from government repression. In January 2015, the communications ministry blocked the entry of a number of foreign publications into the country because they contained depictions of the Prophet Muhammed that had appeared in the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

Harassment of journalists including arrests, threats, and physical attacks occurred regularly throughout 2015. In January, police prevented a news crew with France 24 from filming a segment at a hotel in Rabat. Their footage was confiscated and duplicated before being returned the next day. In February, police raided the headquarters of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights and arrested two French journalists with France 3, who were filming a documentary on Morocco and the Arab Spring. Authorities confiscated their equipment and footage and the two were deported later that month. Another foreign journalist working for a Dutch newspaper was deported without explanation in November. Other journalists have been subject to restrictions
on their movement. In August, a reporter and member of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism was detained and informally accused of a variety of offenses before being placed under a travel ban.

Independent media are scarce in the disputed territory of the Western Sahara. Media operated by supporters of the rebel Polisario Front are accessible through the internet. Moroccan authorities have in the past barred foreign journalists from entering the disputed territory or expelled those who entered without official authorization. In August 2015, authorities deported an Italian student journalist who has been investigating migration patterns in the town of Laayoun.

**Economic Environment: 18 / 30**

There are nearly 20 daily and more than 80 weekly publications in circulation in Morocco, and it is estimated that more than 70 percent of these are privately owned. The high rate of illiteracy in parts of the country limits the reach of the press as a news source. There are more than a dozen private radio stations and hundreds of websites as well as satellite stations that offer alternative and independent viewpoints on political issues. Community radio stations are not recognized by the broadcasting law, but many broadcast online and civil society groups have launched a campaign for their legal recognition by the government. However, broadcast media are dominated by the state. According to the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), in 2015 the government and its allied political parties were given more than double and sometimes triple the airtime on public television and radio broadcasts than was granted to opposition parties. Internet use, particularly on social media, continues to grow at a fast rate. Approximately 57 percent of the population regularly accessed the internet in 2015.
The regime uses advertising and subsidies, as well as aggressive financial harassment, to repress critical media coverage and intimidate the independent press. In October 2015, Aziz Akhanouch, the agriculture minister, canceled his ministry’s advertising contact with the newspaper *Akhbar Al-Yaoum* after it revealed that he allegedly exercised undue control over state funds intended for rural development. General subsidy allocation is controlled by the Information Ministry and has been criticized as nontransparent and discriminatory against smaller publications. In 2015, the dispersal process was reformed, and publications can now receive upwards of two million dirhams in subsidies annually.

Despite heavy reliance on state advertising subsidies, the market for printing and distribution of newspapers is largely free and features a number of private, competitive companies. However, many newspapers are heavily indebted to these companies. Corruption among journalists is endemic.