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Freedom Of The Press - Morocco (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 25
Political Environment: 25
Economic Environment: 18
Total Score: 68

Press freedom in Morocco continued to deteriorate in 2010. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the press law prohibits criticism of the monarchy and Islam, and effectively bars coverage of taboo subjects, including the royal family and the government's position on the status of Western Sahara. Libel remains a criminal offense that carries potentially exorbitant fines or prison terms, and legal cases are a primary method of repressing critical reporting, although the number of cases brought against journalists declined in 2010. In June 2010, the publisher of *Al-Michael* newspaper, Idriss Chahtan, was pardoned and released after serving approximately eight months of a year-long sentence for "publishing false information" in an article he wrote about the king's possibly ailing health. Upon his release, Chahtan still had to contend with another politicized case, a defamation suit over an article in which he alleged that the military had used prostitutes to blackmail influential figures. Chahtan was ordered to pay 20,000 dirhams (\$2,370) to the plaintiff, the widow of a former military officer.

King Mohamed VI and his government wield considerable control over the editorial content of domestic broadcast media. Oversight includes the authority to appoint the heads of all public radio and television stations, and the president and all four board members of the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication, which is responsible for issuing broadcast licenses and monitoring content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. In June 2010 Radio Mars was suspended for 48 hours and fined after a guest claimed that he wanted to one day become president of Morocco. Authorities also temporarily suspended several print publications during the year.

Physical attacks on journalists are less common than legal actions, and although they do occur occasionally, there were no reported physical attacks in 2010. However, in June, two journalists known for their critical writings were subject to a warrantless police search and temporary arrest; one was also falsely charged with theft. Self-censorship remains widespread, as many journalists fear heavy fines, prison sentences, or extralegal intimidation and physical violence in retribution for their stories. Nevertheless, some journalists continue to push the boundaries and report on sensitive subjects such as the military, national security, religion, and sexuality.

Foreign publications are widely available in Morocco, but the foreign media are not immune from government repression. In November 2010, officials expelled 3 Spanish journalists and prevented 10 others from flying to Western Sahara to report on the conflict there. Arguing that Spanish media coverage of the conflict was biased against the Moroccan government, authorities also withdrew the accreditation of

Luis de Vega, a Spanish news correspondent. The government also targeted the Qatari-based satellite network Al-Jazeera in 2010. Two Al-Jazeera journalists were denied accreditation renewal early in 2010 and, in October, the government accused Al-Jazeera of reporting with a biased view against the regime and damaging the country's image. Accreditation for all Al-Jazeera journalists working in Morocco was rescinded, effectively suspending all of the channel's reporting in the country.

According to the Moroccan constitution, the press in the Moroccan-occupied portion of Western Sahara is free, but this is not the case in practice. There is little in the way of independent Sahrawi media. Moroccan authorities are sensitive to any reporting that is not in line with the state's official position on Western Sahara, and they continue to expel or detain Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who write critically on the issue. Alternative viewpoints and resources such as online media or independent broadcasts from abroad are not easily accessible to the population.

There are 17 daily and 90 weekly publications in circulation, and it is estimated that more than 70 percent of these are privately owned. Broadcast media are still dominated by the state, and FM radio stations are largely prohibited from broadcasting programs of a political nature. However, residents can access critical reports through pan-Arab and other satellite television channels. The regime uses advertising and subsidies, as well as aggressive financial harassment, to repress critical media coverage. The regime was able to shut down the independent weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* in 2010 by draining its financial resources. Officials successfully organized a complete advertising boycott of the paper—which had faced a range of persistent harassment for several years—and later crippled the publication further when its assets were seized after a court declared its parent company bankrupt.

Approximately 41 percent of the population regularly accessed the internet in 2010. There is no official legislation regulating internet content or access, but the government sporadically blocks certain websites and online tools, including Google Earth and the LiveJournal blogging platform. The government monitors blogs and other websites and occasionally cracks down on those who produce critical content. This was the case for blogger Boubaker al-Yadib, who served six months in jail after posting photos of police brutality online.