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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Morocco

[Morocco](#)[Freedom of the Press 2013](#)

The Moroccan government promised a campaign to improve press freedom in 2012 as part of its post-Arab Spring political reform agenda. These pledges were not fulfilled in practice, however, as unofficial but clear restrictions remained in place during the year, discouraging coverage of politically and socially sensitive subjects.

Morocco's new constitution, passed in 2011, guarantees freedom of the press, but its vague language enables great latitude for interpretation and hinders enforcement of media protections. The press law prohibits criticism of the monarchy and Islam and effectively bars independent coverage of certain taboo subjects, including the royal family and the status of Western Sahara. Libel remains a criminal offense that can result in prison terms and exorbitant fines. Legal cases are a primary method of repressing critical expression. In February 2012, Walid Bahomane, a teenage student, was sentenced to 18 months in prison after posting a caricature of the king on the social-networking site Facebook. Also that month, Abdul-Samad al-Haidour was sentenced to three years in prison for

criticizing royal policies and calling the king a “dog” in a recording posted on the video-sharing site YouTube.

Journalists are sometimes imprisoned on trumped-up criminal charges, as opposed to explicitly press-related offenses. For example, blogger Mohamed Sokrate was arrested in May 2012 and later sentenced to two years in prison on drug possession and trafficking charges. Press freedom advocates alleged that Sokrate was in fact imprisoned because of his reporting on the king and other sensitive topics. Mohamed al-Dawas, a freelance journalist who reported critically on the government, had been similarly imprisoned in 2011 on charges of drug trafficking. He remained in jail in 2012.

King Mohamed VI and his government wield considerable control over the editorial content of domestic broadcast media. Government oversight includes the authority to appoint the heads of all public radio and television stations. The government also appoints the president and four of eight board members at 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.

The government sporadically blocks certain websites and online tools, including news sites, Google Earth, and blogging platforms. In 2012, the government began developing guidelines to regulate online content. The authorities monitor blogs and other websites, and there has been an increase in progovernment activism online, which some claim is instigated by government agents. The state occasionally cracks down on those who produce critical online content. This practice intensified with the rise of the February 20 protest movement following the eruption of prodemocracy uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011.

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 many 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. Authorities rescinded accreditation for all journalists working in Morocco for Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network in 2010, effectively suspending the network's reporting in the country. The government was in talks with Al-Jazeera in 2012, but its Moroccan bureau remained closed during the year. Foreign publications are also occasionally banned or censored. The Spanish daily *El País* was banned twice in 2012, first for publishing a cartoon of the king and later for coverage of a book that was critical of the monarch.

Physical attacks on journalists are less common than legal actions, though there were reports of harassment and intimidation in 2012. Ali Lmrabet, who runs an online news portal, was beaten and robbed by unidentified men in August. He alleged that the assailants were plainclothes policemen and said some of them had also broken into his house earlier in the month. In August, police attacked Agence France-Presse journalist Omar Brouksy while he was reporting on demonstrations outside the parliament building. Brouksy was targeted again in October, after describing a candidate as "close to the king" in an article about legislative elections. The government characterized the article as "an unprofessional dispatch" because it implied that that king was not politically neutral, and rescinded Brouksy's press accreditation.

According to the constitution, the press in Moroccan-occupied 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 the territory's status, and they continue to expel, detain, or harass 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 almost 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. Broadcast media are still dominated by the state, and FM radio stations are largely prohibited from airing 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. Approximately 55 percent of the population regularly accessed the internet in 2012, the highest penetration rate on the African continent.

## 2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

**Not Free**

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**66**

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**24**

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**24**

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**18**

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