

Forum: UNHRC

Issue: Freedom of press and speech in Morocco

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Introduction

In the age of the Internet, when a journalist – or a citizen who exercises the function of a journalist in his own way – wants to transmit information to the outside world, he has a technology that was still unimaginable a few years ago. This possibility of communicating benefits, at the same time, from the legal protection of a whole series of international conventions and case law which are integrated into the constitutional frameworks of many countries and which enshrine the freedom of expression, which also includes the freedom of the press.

Freedom of the press and freedom of expression are indeed fundamental freedoms and they are substantial human rights and constitute a pillar of democracy and the rule of law. Freedom of the press, exercised within the limits set by international law and case law, is also an indicator of pluralism and citizen participation in matters of public interest, and a key vector of progress and social justice, and the development of any country in its multiple dimensions.

The analysis of the situation of these freedoms is therefore essential insofar as they reflect the state of health of the political situation while providing key indicators on the social, economic and cultural situation. For an environment to be conducive to its exercise, there must be appropriate security at different levels, as well as a framework of freedom, pluralism and independence of the media.

In practice, however, the ideal conditions for an environment conducive to freedom of expression and of the press are far from being met. From the moment when the latter come into conflict with the particular interests of a State with authoritarian and repressive power, all the legal recognition enshrined in the Constitutions and International Conventions ratified by the States concerned collapse.

The case of Morocco is in this sense a paradigmatic example. The chronicle of the independent press over the past two decades presents more gray areas than lights, and this also includes the recent expansion of online media and social media in recent years. As the number of spaces of information and opinion on the Internet, the State

and the apparatus of power have also reinforced the measures and means intended to hinder, control and repress this freedom.

All these aspects also converge towards the strengthening of self-censorship of journalists, in relation to the red lines, traditionally focused on the monarchy, religion and territorial integrity in relation to the question of Western Sahara.

Since the last years of the reign of Hassan II, which marked a certain openness in this area, to date, many journalists have seen themselves forced to leave the country, change profession or adapt to the rules of the state-imposed gambling. Others, still, were condemned to sanctions, very high economic costs or even prison sentences.

With a written press that has been reduced to its simplest expression, the fight for freedom of expression and of the press has moved to the digital space. The use of the Internet and its various applications has become a tool at the service of journalists, citizens and civil society organisations to advance good governance, human rights and transparency.

In the current international context, characterised by widespread repression of freedom of the press and the exercise of freedom of expression on the Internet, the study of two dimensions that configure freedom of expression and of the press is fundamental. These two dimensions are the right to transmit information and opinions to the attention of a wide audience, which is particularly important in the digital age, and the right to seek and receive information, which forms the basis of the right to information.

Based on the above, this research report is mainly focused on the analysis of the online press in Morocco and the factors which condition or impede the exercise of press freedom online in this country, and will also look into certain questions relating to "citizen journalism". This last concept makes reference to the function of journalism exercised by people from all walks of life, including full-time professional reporters and analysts as well as bloggers and other individuals who self-publish the product of their work, under in print, on the Internet or through other channels.

For the elaboration of the report, the researchers analysed the documentary sources the list of which appears in appendix I, and carried out during the month of November 2016 a series of interviews with journalists and experts in Morocco and via Skype, including confidentiality was respected.

Term Definitions

Freedom of press

The right of newspapers, magazines, etc., to report news without being controlled by the government.

Makhzen

Style of government which is characterised by strict control over the major issues of the country.

Casablanca terrorist attacks

A series of suicide bombings on 16 May 2003, carried out by some ten men from the Sidi Mounen shantytown, killing 41 persons and wounding about a hundred of others. A "Morrocan 9/11" which triggered a political crisis and a major security crackdown.

CSOs

Non-State, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere that are separate from the State and the market. CSOs represent a wide range of interests and ties. They can include community-based organisations as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Censorship

The suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.

Freedom of expression

The power or right to express one's opinions without censorship, restraint, or legal penalty.

Spring democracy

Democracy Spring was a progressive social movement organisation that used campaigns of escalating nonviolent civil disobedience to build active public support to "end the corruption of big money in politics and protect the right to vote for all Americans."

Background Information

General context

The system of power and the articulation of the political scene are essential for freedom of the press in general.

The said power system in Morocco, also called Makhzen, plays a key role in the area of fundamental rights and freedoms. Commonly understood, it describes the network of people and relationships that in the political, economic, bureaucratic and military have a decisive influence in the management of affairs of the state (and which also includes more broadly the ulemas, certain brotherhoods, sports and regional development associations and other actors).

Traditionally, the physical space and the central core of the Makhzen, and integrated culture of power is constituted by the king and his advisers (Dar el-Makhzen).

The Makhzen, in another dimension, also refers to a style of government which is characterised by strict control over the major issues of the country; a great capacity for persuasion and co-optation, immobility practices and a system of repression and violence that does not admit dissidence. Many people and companies linked to the Makhzen control most of the print media and several online media. In addition, the state controls television and radio stations that have the largest audience.

Another fundamental characteristic of the power system in Morocco is the absence of an effective separation of powers, with a monarch who is not content to reign but who also governs and controls justice. Another point to emphasise is the lack of legitimacy of most political parties, discredited for having been co-opted by the State.

Over the past two decades, Morocco has gone through several stages in terms of freedom of the press, marked both by the political, national and international community and the pressures to modernise and extend the freedoms obtained by all Moroccan social movements and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Last years of Hassan II reign and the first years of Mohamed VI

The last decade of the reign of Hassan II (who died in 1999), father of the current monarch, was marked by a series of reforms, carried out by the political opposition and the Moroccan human rights movement, and to which the international context of the moment also contributed. During the earlier stage known as the “years of lead” – which began in 1959, and became even more virulent from the 1960s until the mid-1980s – human rights had been swept away, and hundreds of enforced disappearances had taken place at that time.

In 1998 the political opposition acceded to the government, by an “alternation consensual”, thus described because in practice it assumed the acceptance by opposition to the rules of the game imposed by the Palace. From there, an opening significant impact on public space has occurred and freedom of the press has expanded, with the emergence of new independent media.

The accession to the throne of Mohamed VI in 1999, after the death of his father Hassan II, raises great hopes for the future of the country. The first gestures of the Palace seemed to indicate a change in power structures, a loosening compared to the traditional red lines and a pronounced momentum to establish the project democratic and modernization announced, even if the king clearly indicated that the executive character of the monarchy remained intact.

Many civil society organisations (CSOs), such as AMDH and Freedom Now, consider that the stage during which Morocco experienced greater freedom of press- in the professional sense and in accordance with international standards- has was that between the last years of the 1990s and the beginning of the following, partly due to Hassan II's desire to guarantee a smooth and peaceful. This step culminated legally for this sector with the modification of the Press Code in 2002 considered more favourable to press freedom than the earlier text, but while maintaining many limitations.

During this stage four reference journalistic projects for the written press independent in French, have emerged. They are: Le Journal (1997), Demain (2000), Doumane (2002), and Tel Quel (2000). The only publication that has survived is Tel Quel,

even if it has lost the critical verve and independence that characterised its first years. These three publications and others have opened a space for freedom of expression unprecedented in Morocco, which has also contributed to fostering the commitment of citizenship on matters of public interest. These new media also developed investigative journalism through reporting on issues that were previously completely censored.

Terrorist attacks in Casablanca

In 2003, the attacks in Casablanca marked a turning point, and led, among other political consequences, to an increase in censorship in the media by the state as part of the anti-terrorism policy.

During this stage there was an obvious regression of press freedom, with the return to censorship practices and other legal proceedings against journalists resulting in jail terms and penalties disproportionate to the economy. The economic suffocation of publications, directly through economic sanctions, through the judiciary, or through tax inspections, or in a more subtle way, by putting pressure on companies to withdraw vital advertising as a source of funding for the press independently, were pressure instruments frequently used by the power.

The editors of *Le Journal et Demain*, Aboubakr Jamaï and Alí Lmrabet, have been prosecuted for their publications (*Le Journal*, *Demain* and *Doumane*) had to close and both had to leave the country in 2007 and 2004 respectively. Lmrabet spent several months in prison and was denied the right to practise journalism in Morocco for 10 years. Other publications also characterised by critical journalism towards the state, like *Rissalata al-Fotouwa* and *Akhbar al-Yaoum*, who were also forced to close.

The weekly *Tel-Quel* created in 2006 the publication *Nichane*, in dialectal Arabic Moroccan (*darija*) and quickly became a great journalistic success. The publication was nevertheless suspended for two months in 2007, and its publisher, Driss Ksikes, was brought to justice (along with another journalist) and sentenced for having undermined Islam, morals and good customs and sentenced to a three-year prison sentence. In 2010, *Nichane* went bankrupt and ceased its activities. Other examples of critical publications and attempts to achieve a serious work of investigative journalism have

also been forced to suspend their activities during this stage such as Al Jareeda al Okhraet and Al Jareeda al Oula.

As for the Internet, censorship also increased during this stage as illustrated by the closure of 4 websites run by Islamists (because of their mobilisation in solidarity with the Palestinian cause after the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip in 2009) or other legal proceedings against young internet users.

The 20th February (2011) movement

It was only from 2011 and in the context of the "spring democratic" Moroccan that a new opening of the space of the freedom of expression and of the press, essential elements on the Internet; but this will only last a few months.

Social networks and some online media have played a key role in the social mobilizations channelled by the movement of February 20 (M20F), and animated mainly by young people. Peaceful mobilizations happen quickly deployed throughout the territory. The demand for a democratic constitution and a substantial change at the institutional level – which would include an effective separation powers, the dissolution of parliament and a new government-have clearly highlighted the limits of a system based on the concentration of powers in the hands of the monarch and his entourage; the disproportionate accompaniment of rents and wealth by a minority; the enormous social inequalities; and the big ones shortcomings of primary social services among others.

As part of the process activated by the M20F, early legislative elections were held in November 2011, resulting in the victory of the Moderate Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD). Its Secretary-General was appointed Prime Minister by the king, in accordance with the new constitutional provisions. With the arrival in the government, from this Islamist formation, a new political scene is drawn, marking a new stage in the Moroccan democratic course, complex and cramped, and where Islam is the anchor of political culture.

The atmosphere created and the pressures adapted by the M20F have been created for several months on greater freedom of expression and to some extent a relaxation of traditional “red lines”, especially on online media and social networks. But this did not last long, and the state soon took over the actions of censorship and prohibition of fundamental public freedoms, and in particular the freedoms of expression and of the press, as well as those of assembly and association. Many reports from 2013 testify to this.

Regarding freedom of the press and “citizen journalism” online, alongside the exponential expansion and increase of new online media and Internet and social media users over the past few years, the state has multiplied the mechanisms of control and censorship as well as the articulation of new forms of repression that have led many journalists to self-censorship such as we analyse it further.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Morocco

In Morocco, incessant mass communication attempts at shaping political views and shuffling audience priorities explain the parallel histories of the media, freedom of expression and democratisation. Tough different constitutions, books of specifications and signing international laws guarantee freedom of expression, the approach Moroccan media adhere to has sparked and influenced discussions in the public sphere, with relation to the media, political and cultural changes, governance and power-sharing mechanisms along the democratisation process.

Moreover, the fluctuating move of democratisation in Morocco indicates that its rhythm is unsteady, that the transitory period is never ending and that social change continually oscillates to perpetuate the status quo. Such practice blurs the legitimacy of democratisation steps and blemishes the institutions responsible for its realisation, including the Makhzen.

In this atmosphere, journalists often receive harassment that bars their freedom of expression, which leads sometimes to imprisonment, specifically when taboos and tacit red lines are transgressed. The controversial taboos in the Moroccan political landscape are:

- (a) criticisms of the monarchy, especially on human rights abuses;
- (b) territorial integrity—especially Moroccan Sahara policy issues;
- (c) religion;
- (d) corruption in the military.

Consequently, freedom of expression is hampered when its practice challenges the status quo, but the extent of the state's crackdown on critics depends heavily on the political atmosphere.

CIVICUS

CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world. Founded in 1993, we

proudly promote marginalised voices, especially from the Global South, and have members in more than 160 countries throughout the world.

The organisation works to protect and grow civic space where people can express and organise themselves. In particular, the organisation focuses on regions where participatory democracy and freedom of association are at risk. CIVICUS counts among its central values: Justice and Equality, where all people are free to exercise their rights as citizens as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

European Union

The European Union (EU) supports freedom of the press as a fundamental human right and encourages all its partners, including Morocco, to respect and protect it. The EU has various programs and initiatives in place to promote media freedom and pluralism, and to provide support to journalists and media organisations in Morocco and other countries.

For example, the EU has funded projects aimed at strengthening the capacity of independent media and promoting freedom of expression in Morocco. The EU also works with local civil society organisations to monitor and report on media freedom in the country.

The EU regularly raises concerns about the state of media freedom in Morocco in its political dialogues with the Moroccan government, and calls for the protection of journalists and their rights. The EU also advocates for the creation of an enabling environment for the media sector to operate freely and independently.

It is worth noting that despite these efforts, media freedom in Morocco continues to face challenges, and journalists often face harassment, intimidation, and censorship. The EU continues to raise these issues and to support the development of an independent and pluralistic media sector in Morocco.

USA

The United States of America (USA) has also been involved in promoting freedom of the press in Morocco and has expressed concern about the state of media freedom in the country. The US government views freedom of the press as a cornerstone of democracy and an essential aspect of human rights.

The US has used various mechanisms to support media freedom in Morocco, including through the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which operates various media outlets, including Voice of America, that provide independent and objective reporting on events in Morocco and other countries.

In addition, the US has provided funding and technical support to civil society organisations working to promote media freedom and protect journalists in Morocco. The US government has also raised concerns about the treatment of journalists and media workers in Morocco through diplomatic channels, and has called for the protection of their rights.

In its annual Human Rights Reports, the US Department of State also includes a section on freedom of the press in Morocco, which provides information on the state of media freedom in the country and the challenges faced by journalists.

It is worth noting that while the US government supports media freedom in Morocco, the country continues to face significant challenges in this area. Many journalists in Morocco work in difficult conditions, and they often face censorship, harassment, and intimidation. The US continues to monitor the situation and advocate for the protection of media freedom in the country.

Spain

Spain, as a neighbouring country to Morocco and a major player in the European Union, has also been involved in promoting freedom of the press in Morocco. Spain views freedom of expression and freedom of the press as fundamental human rights and has been supportive of efforts to improve the situation in Morocco.

Spain has supported various initiatives aimed at strengthening the capacity of independent media in Morocco and promoting media freedom. For example, Spanish media organisations and NGOs have collaborated with their Moroccan counterparts to organise training programs and workshops aimed at improving the skills of journalists and media workers.

In addition, Spain has provided funding and technical support to civil society organisations working to promote media freedom and protect journalists in Morocco. The Spanish government has also raised concerns about the treatment of journalists and media workers in Morocco through diplomatic channels, and has called for the protection of their rights.

It is worth noting that while Spain has been supportive of efforts to promote media freedom in Morocco, the country continues to face significant challenges in this area. Journalists in Morocco often work in difficult conditions and face censorship, harassment, and intimidation. Spain continues to monitor the situation and advocate for the protection of media freedom in Morocco.

Other agencies

In Morocco, there are a number of organisations that promote freedom of speech and press. However, there is no specific agency dedicated solely to freedom of speech.

There are several NGOs that work to protect and promote freedom of expression, such as the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), which was founded in 1979 and is one of the country's leading human rights organisations. There are also media organisations, such as the Moroccan Press Association and the Moroccan Syndicate of Journalists, that work to defend journalists and media workers and promote press freedom.

Despite these efforts, freedom of speech and the press in Morocco are still limited by various laws and regulations, and there have been reports of censorship and repression of journalists who report on sensitive issues, such as corruption and human

rights abuses. Nevertheless, there is a vibrant and growing civil society in Morocco that is dedicated to promoting human rights and democratic reforms, and many of these organisations continue to fight for greater freedom of expression and press freedom.

Timeline of events

- 1956** Morocco gained independence from France and the country's constitution guarantees freedom of the press.
- 1960s-1980s** During this period, Morocco experienced political instability and frequent changes of government, and the media was subject to censorship and control by the state.
- 1990s-2000s** The 1990s saw the beginning of a process of political and economic liberalisation in Morocco, and the media sector experienced some degree of relaxation. However, journalists still faced censorship and harassment, and many media outlets remained state-controlled.
- 2002** Morocco passed a new press code that removed some restrictions on the media, but journalists continued to face censorship and harassment.
- 2003** A number of independent newspapers were launched, reflecting a growing trend towards a more diverse and pluralistic media sector.
- 2007** Morocco hosted the World Press Freedom Day conference, which was seen as a positive step towards improving the situation for journalists in the country.
- 2010** The Moroccan government launched a major reform of the country's media sector, aimed at promoting media freedom and increasing transparency.
- 2011** The Arab Spring protests spread to Morocco, and the country experienced large-scale demonstrations demanding political and social reforms. During this time, the media played an important role in reporting on the events, but many journalists faced harassment and censorship.
- 2012** Morocco adopted a new constitution that improved the protections for freedom of expression and the press.
- 2013** Despite the constitutional reforms, journalists in Morocco continue to face censorship and harassment, and many media outlets are state-controlled. The media landscape in Morocco is highly polarised, with pro-government and opposition media outlets often presenting differing viewpoints.
- 2016** The Moroccan government proposed new laws aimed at improving the legal framework for freedom of the press in the country.
- 2019** The Moroccan government passed a new law that increased protections for journalists, including provisions related to the protection of sources.
- 2021** There have been growing concerns about the state of media freedom in Morocco, with reports of censorship, harassment, and intimidation of

journalists, particularly in the context of the ongoing political tensions in the country.

Relevant UN treaties/resolutions

2023/2506(RSP)

Urges the Moroccan authorities to respect freedom of expression and media freedom, guarantee imprisoned journalists, in particular Omar Radi, Souleiman Raissouni and Taoufik Bouachrine, a fair trial, their immediate provisional release and cease the harassment of all journalists.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0057_EN.html

65/224

Calls upon all States to adopt necessary measures to prohibit the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, and encourages States to include aspects relating to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities in their national plans of action and in this context to take forms of multiple discrimination against minorities fully into account;

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/4dd660552.html>

70/157

Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatisation, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/441/81/PDF/N1544181.pdf?OpenElement>

2178

Calls upon States to take steps to decrease the risk of radicalization to terrorism in their societies, such as engaging relevant local communities and empowering concerned groups of civil society.

<https://www.justice.gov/file/344501/download>

27/31

Requests the High Commissioner to prepare a compilation of practical recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling

environment for civil society and in this regard to continue to engage with and seek the views of States.

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/179/53/PDF/G1417953.pdf?OpenElement>

Previous attempts to solve the issue

In March 2011, and every year since then, the Human Rights Council adopted a consensus resolution entitled "Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief." This resolution expresses a global consensus, and Morocco supported it. It does not mention restricting freedom of expression, except to urge criminalising "incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief."

The UN General Assembly on December 17, 2015 adopted by consensus a resolution (GA resolution 70/157) with very similar wording. While it "condemns any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence," and calls on states to address incitement, it refrains from calling on states to restrict speech, except to adopt "measures to criminalise incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief."

Another international effort to protect both freedom of expression and religion is the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. The plan, the outcome of an initiative by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to clarify the scope of state obligations under Article 20 of the ICCPR, opposes blasphemy laws due to their stifling impact on freedom of expression, and urges that prohibitions on "incitement" be reserved for the most extreme cases, and require specific safeguards to prevent their abuse. It was signed in Rabat in 2012 by a group of experts.

Possible solutions

Monitoring and Reporting

The UN can monitor the situation in Morocco, including the treatment of journalists and the status of freedom of expression and press freedom. This can be done through the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other UN bodies, and could result in reports and recommendations on how to improve the situation.

Encouraging Legal Reform

The UN can encourage the Moroccan government to reform its laws and regulations to promote freedom of expression and press freedom. This could include calls for the repeal of provisions that criminalise journalism and restrict freedom of expression, and the introduction of measures to protect journalists and their sources.

Supporting Civil Society

The UN can provide support to civil society organisations that are working to promote freedom of expression and press freedom in Morocco. This could include funding for training and capacity-building programs, and providing technical and legal assistance.

Raising Awareness

The UN can raise awareness about the lack of freedom of press in Morocco through its various communication channels, including its websites and social media platforms. This could help to mobilise international support for the promotion of freedom of expression and press freedom in Morocco.

Promoting Good Practices

The UN can also promote good practices in relation to freedom of expression and press freedom, and encourage Morocco to adopt these practices. This could include the sharing of best practices from other countries, and the provision of technical assistance to support reforms.

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