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Morocco: Protest Leader Alleges Police Beat Him Possible State Security Charges for Charismatic Figure in Rif

Police arrested and severely beat the de facto leader of ongoing social protests in [Morocco's](#) Rif region, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said today, based on an account the protest leader gave his lawyer. Authorities are investigating Nasser Zefzafi, the protest leader, on grave charges, including one that carries the death penalty and some that appear political in nature.

Zefzafi, 38, is the best-known of at least 127 protesters and activists jailed during a police crackdown on the mostly peaceful demonstrations in northern Morocco that began in late May, 2017. Zefzafi requested a medical exam to document the abuse when he appeared before a prosecutor on June 5. But the request has yet to be fulfilled, said Abdelaziz Nouaydi, one of Zefzafi's lawyers, raising concerns about the court's compliance with its duty to investigate allegations of police violence.

"Moroccan authorities should investigate the credible allegations of police violence against Zefzafi and refrain from filing any charges that stem from peaceful speech or protest," said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East and North Africa director of Human Rights Watch. "At this stage, the case looks like it's more about throwing the book at a protest leader than punishing criminal behavior."

Police arrested Zefzafi on May 29 in the village of Douar Lahrech, about 50 kilometers from al-Hoceima, the Rif's main city. His arrest came three days after he had interrupted the Friday sermon at a mosque in al-Hoceima to defend the Rif protest movement after the imam, a state employee, had criticized it in his sermon.

At about 6:30 a.m. on May 29, a dozen police from the National Brigade of the Judiciary Police (BNPJ) broke down the door of the house where Zefzafi and two other activists, Fahim Ghattas and Mohamed Haki, were staying, Zefzafi told Nouaydi, on June 12 in Casablanca's Oukacha prison. The police broke furniture and windows, and assaulted the three men even though they offered no resistance, Zefzafi said. He said he had a 1.5-

centimeter cut on his scalp, another one below his left eye, and bruises on his back.

The police insulted the three men in vulgar terms, pressing them to shout “Long live the king!” and calling them “separatists,” the account said. The police transported them to al-Hoceima and then flew them, hooded, and handcuffed, to Casablanca. There, the police took Zefzafi for medical care, including stitches to his scalp, and gave him clean clothes to replace his blood-stained ones.

Nouaydi told Human Rights Watch that he conducted a separate interview on June 12 with Ghattas, whose account of the arrest corroborated Zefzafi’s.

Zefzafi remained in pre-charge detention from May 29 until June 5, when he and the others were taken before the crown prosecutor of the Casablanca Court of Appeals. The Code of Penal Procedure allows pretrial detention to be extended to a maximum of eight days in cases involving state security offenses. Nouaydi, who was among the lawyers representing the defendants at the hearing, said Zefzafi detailed to the prosecutor the police conduct during the arrest operation and demanded a medical examination.

Morocco’s code of penal procedure obliges the prosecutor and the investigating judge, with narrow exceptions, to order a medical examination of a defendant who requests one, or if the prosecutor or judge observe signs of violence on the defendant.

The evening of the hearing, the crown prosecutor referred the defendants to the investigating judge. According to the prosecutor’s written referral, dated June 14 and [published](#) on the news website [badil.info](#), the charges he asked the judge to investigate include one that carries the death penalty: “participation in harming internal state security by carrying out an attack the goal of which is to cause destruction and killing and theft in more than one region.”

The prosecutor also recommended charges of “participating in violence against state security forces that led to blood-letting;” “forming a plot to harm internal security;” “harming internal state security by receiving financial sums [...] to finance activities and propaganda of a nature to harm the unity and sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco and shake the faith of citizens in the Moroccan state and the institutions of the Moroccan people;” “organizing unauthorized demonstrations and holding public gatherings without permission and participating in an armed gathering;” “insulting state institutions and the public security agents;” and “publicly inciting against the Kingdom’s territorial integrity.”

While the recommended charges that include acts of violence are recognizably criminal, many of the other charges either violate by their very nature basic rights (such as

“insulting state institutions”) or are so broad and vague that authorities can easily use them to punish opponents for speaking or protesting peacefully. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Morocco ratified in 1979, and Morocco’s 2011 constitution, guarantee the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

The investigating judge sent Zefzafi, to pretrial detention. The evidence against him is not yet available. The government did not respond to requests from Human Rights Watch for information on the case.

The Rif has been rocked by protests since October 2016, after Mohsen Fikri, a fishmonger, was crushed to death in a garbage truck in which he had climbed to retrieve a valuable haul of swordfish that the authorities had confiscated from him on the grounds that it had been fished illegally. Zefzafi, an unemployed man, earned renown in the Rif for his fiery speeches about social justice, which were viewable on social media. He eventually became the [main leader](#) of street protests against the state’s perceived marginalization of the Rif, and in favor of more jobs and better social services in the region.

Though the demonstrations were mostly peaceful, there were incidents in which people described by the police as protesters threw rocks and set police housing and vehicles afire. Police began arresting activists on May 26. Since then, at least 83 were prosecuted in al-Hoceima, of whom [32 were sentenced to prison for](#) between 2 and 18 months. Another group of at least 45, including Zefzafi, was transferred to Casablanca and currently await trial, said Driss Ouaali of Rabat, another defense lawyer for the group. A few were released pending trial, while the others remain in custody.

Defense lawyers said that Zefzafi is to appear before an investigative judge for further questioning on July 10.

Nouaydi, the defense lawyer, is a member of the advisory committee of the Human Rights Watch Middle East and North Africa division.

“Besides Zefzafi and Ghattas, many other Rif protesters and activists have reported police brutality following arrest,” said Heba Morayef, North Africa research director for Amnesty International. “To combat impunity and ensure fair trials, the courts in Casablanca and al- Hoceima should ensure prompt medical examinations of defendants and preserve all pertinent physical evidence.”

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