

# Reporters Without Borders

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Middle East/North Africa - Morocco

Media freedom in retreat

## Sustained crackdown on independent reporting in Morocco

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Media freedom has been in retreat in the past few months in Morocco, as the kingdom's authorities have cracked down on journalists and three government bills that could improve the legislative environment for the media have stalled in parliament.

Officials have above all been putting pressure on the press to ensure that "sensitive" subjects are not covered in a free and independent manner.

One of the most spectacular examples of this crackdown was the deportation on 16 February of French journalists **Jean-Louis Perez** and **Pierre Chautard**, who were doing a report for *France 3* on the economic and social situation in Morocco four years after the "Moroccan Spring."

Before seizing their video recordings and putting them on a flight to Paris, the authorities "arrested" them at the headquarters of Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH), one of the country's leading human rights NGOs, which the interior ministry has accused of "[undermining the actions of the security forces.](#)"

This operation was carried by about 20 police officers and representatives of the Rabat wilaya (regional government), who injured an activist as they stormed into the AMDH's headquarters.

In a release following the raid, Reporters Without Borders condemned this disgraceful act of censorship and urged the authorities to return the confiscated video material.

In January, a *France 24* crew was prevented from filming a programme in the series "Hadith Al Awassim" (Debated in Capital Cities) in an auditorium it had rented in Rabat. Accompanied by police officers, an interior ministry official arrived and ordered the journalists to cut short the filming of the programme (entitled "Can we laugh about everything?"). He also confiscated the video footage they had recorded, returning it the next day after viewing it.

Without giving any explanation, the authorities prevented an international conference on investigative journalism from being held in a Rabat hotel on 22 January on [the initiative of Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation.](#)

Journalists and experts from Morocco, France, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and other countries, as well as Moroccan communication minister Mustapha El Khalfi, were to have taken part but, on the eve of the conference, the interior ministry gave the hotel's management verbal instructions to prevent it from taking place.

As a result, the organizers had to change the venue and hold the conference at the AMDH's headquarters without the minister.

Sahrawi journalist **Mahmod Al-Lhaissan** was released provisionally on 25 February, eight months after his arrest in El Aaiún, the capital of Western Sahara (a territory controlled by Morocco since 1975) but is still facing trial on charges of participating in an "armed gathering," obstructing a public thoroughfare, attacking officials while they were on duty, and damaging public property.

Lhaissan is a reporter for a TV station operated by the *Polisario Front*, a Sahrawi pro-independence movement backed by Algeria. According to local NGOs, he was arrested because of his coverage of

Sahrawi demonstrations after an Algeria-Germany World Cup match on 30 June that quickly took on a pro-independence character. His coverage drew attention to the force used by the Moroccan police to disperse demonstrators.

Meanwhile, the three media reform bills – on “press and publishing,” the “status of professional journalists” and the “National Press Council” – that the communication ministry unveiled on 18 October have yet to be adopted by parliament.

[In its comments on the reform package in November](#), Reporters Without Borders noted that the abolition of prison sentences for most media offences (but not insulting the king or religion or “endangering” territorial integrity) was one of its most innovative aspects.

But journalists fear that disproportionate and exorbitant fines will replace prison terms, and are calling for changes to the legislative package.

*“The provisions on the confidentiality of journalists’ sources and defamation proceedings are a big step forward but they need to be tightened and reinforced in order to constitute effective guarantees,”* Reporters Without Borders said.

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