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Analysis: Morocco -- Social Media Complicates Regime's Message Control

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Morocco -- Increasing Use of Social Media Complicates Regime's Message Control

As the Moroccan regime has cracked down recently on traditional media, the increased availability of high-speed Internet and Internet-enabled mobile devices has allowed Moroccans to take otherwise unreportable stories and grievances online. So far, the government has been relatively hands-off with regard to Internet content, though a few cases directly involving the royal family have resulted in arrests and trials. As social media use becomes more widespread and available within Morocco, the monarchy risks reaching a tipping point beyond which only draconian filtering would enable it to control the media message, a step it seems unlikely to take given its sensitivities regarding its international image.

Rabat Hardens Line on Traditional Media

Over the past two years, the Moroccan Government has reversed a trend of liberalization in regard to media that began with King Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne in 1999. Along with the threat of imprisonment, more common forms of pressure are confiscation of publications or heavy fines levied on publishers.[\[a\]](#)

- On 15 November 2009, a publisher and a columnist for widely read independent daily *Al Massae* were convicted of "spreading false information" after they published an article discussing the drug trade in Morocco. They were sentenced to three and two months in prison, respectively (MAP, 16 November 2009).[\[1\]](#)
- The Moroccan Ministry of the Interior on 27 September 2009 shut down the independent daily *Akhbar al Yawm* and imprisoned its editor and cartoonist after the daily published a cartoon depicting the King's cousin in front of what appears to be an incomplete star of David on the Moroccan flag. The two men were charged with disrespecting the national flag and failing to show respect to the prince, resulting in four years of suspended jail sentences and over \$400,000 of fines each (*TelQue!*, 3 October).[\[3\]](#)

- On 15 October, Driss Chahtane, the editor of daily *Al Mishaal* was sentenced to one year in prison for publishing an article speculating on the health of the King, who had been out of public sight with what authorities said was a rotavirus infection.[4] Other journalists who wrote similar pieces were reportedly interrogated by the security services for several days (*Al-Ahdath al-Maghrebiya*, 7 September 2009).[5]

Bloggers, Social Networks Push Traditional Boundaries

As



On French site Backchich.info, Khalid Gueddar wrote a series of strips entitled "The King Who Didn't Want to Be King," showing King Mohammed VI chafing at the responsibilities of his office. The strip above shows the king's "Leisure Activities" and ends with him yelling "I do not want to be a king!" (bakchich.info).[6]



"Prince Mulaï Ismaïl on his wedding chair" (Reprinted by TelQuel, 3 October 2009)[2]

traditional media has faced mounting pressure from the authorities, the increasing availability of high-speed Internet and a relatively liberal filtering mechanism used by the state has led many dissenters to take their efforts online. Opposition websites, blogs, and users of social networking sites -- both abroad and within Morocco -- have regularly crossed what are considered red lines in traditional media.

- According to the OpenNet Initiative, Morocco -- where high-speed Internet access increased by 220% between 2005 and 2007 -- does not have a comprehensive filtering mechanism, and access to the Internet is, "for the most part, open and unrestricted" (opennet.net, 6 August 2009).[7] [b]
- Khalid Gueddar, who was imprisoned in September 2009 for his cartoon in *Akhbar Al-Yawm*, also regularly contributed more provocative cartoons to the Paris-based online news site *Bakchich.info*. Many of these directly lampoon the king.[8]

- Numerous websites and blogs, including several which claim to be written by individuals within Morocco, take on issues that are taboo in the traditional media, including the issue of independence of Western Sahara and discussions about the royal family.[\[9\]](#) [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#)
- After an issue of independent weekly newsmagazine *TelQuel* was confiscated in August 2009 for publishing a poll showing the king with a 91% approval rating, Moroccan users quickly created a *Facebook* group titled "In Morocco, I'm a 9%." On *Twitter*, the #9pcMaroc hashtag was used to organize online dissent regarding the high rating and the confiscation, according to a government-owned daily in the UAE (*The National*, 5 August).[\[12\]](#)

Limited Options for Response to Online Provocations

Moroccan authorities are evidently aware of the use of the Internet for expressing dissent, yet have relatively few options for controlling what citizens are able to write and to read online. In general, Rabat has used the same strategies that they have with traditional media -- imprisonment, fines, and efforts to encourage self-censorship -- but these have often had the opposite of the intended effect. The Moroccan blogosphere, which is growing rapidly, has reacted vigorously to arrests, and the blogs condemning them remain accessible within Morocco.

- Authorities have arrested several bloggers, including El Bachir Hazzam, who was sentenced to four months in prison in December 2009 for "spreading false information about human rights that undermined the kingdom's image," after he reported that violence had been used to suppress a student demonstration in Agadir. The arrest was widely reported in the region, including on Moroccan blogs, which quickly disseminated AFP reports of the arrest (cabalamuse.wordpress.com, 12 December 2009).[\[13\]](#)
- According to the same blog and reports in regional media including Algerian online daily *Le Matin*, Internet cafes -- which represent the only Internet access for many Moroccans -- are widely considered to be surveilled, especially when violence or protests are taking place, as was the case in Agadir.[\[14\]](#) [\[15\]](#)
- Security services appear to monitor activity associated with individual IP addresses. In February 2008, an IT engineer was arrested for "usurping the identity" of King Mohammed's brother after creating a spoof *Facebook* profile of him from his home computer, according to pro-palace Moroccan daily *Le Matin* (2 December 2009). In order to discover the identity of the creator of the site, the services would have had to get the information from *Facebook* itself, from the ISP, or through its own surveillance.[\[16\]](#) [\[c\]](#)
- As news of the arrests of Gueddar, Hazzam, and others has spread, there has been vigorous discussion on the matter in the Moroccan blogosphere, with the vast majority of bloggers condemning the arrests and several painting 2009 as an "annus horribilis for freedom of the expression in Morocco" (www.monagora.fr, 19 November 2009; larbi.org, 28 December 2009).[\[17\]](#) [\[18\]](#)

Rabat Keen to Protect Modernizing, Liberal Image

While surveillance is evident, as are other attempts to control Internet sites, the Moroccan Government has refrained from full-scale filtering and monitoring of the Internet. In addition to the technical difficulties of such an approach, Morocco evidently wishes to be seen as a liberal state and is likely aware that draconian measures would deal a severe blow to that image.

- According to the nonprofit advocacy group Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Foreign Minister Khalid Naciri confronted representatives of the group in person after Morocco fell from 122 to 127 in RSF's annual Press Freedom Index, as he "felt he had been duped" regarding the organization's rankings (rsf.org, 28 October 2009).[\[19\]](#)
- Media convictions are frequently overturned on appeal, dropped by the prosecution, or commuted by the king. For example, the sentences of Gueddar and Chahtane were both reduced significantly after the initial convictions, possibly indicating that the prosecutions are designed to harass rather than to punish or that the

regime is sensitive to public and foreign pressure over its rights record.[\[20\]](#) [\[21\]](#)

- Maghreb Arab Press, the official Moroccan news service, regularly cites statements from international organizations that purportedly refer positively to Morocco's human rights and civil liberties, often taking quotes out of context in an effort to make the regime look better. On 17 December 2009, for instance, it positively portrayed a statement by Amnesty International (AI) that "Morocco is in pivotal position in human rights promotion" in the region, when in fact AI was once again repeating its calls for Morocco to allow political activist Aminatou Haidar to return to the country.[\[22\]](#)

Outlook: Rabat Faces Tipping Point; Will Likely Lean Towards Liberalization

As increasing portions of Moroccan society begin to gather news on the Internet, the regime will be faced with a decision regarding the extent and purpose of its control over the Internet. Rabat will likely choose to keep the status quo, rather than cracking down on Internet use, in effect liberalizing the online community over time as more citizens gain Internet access and limited government resources mean only the most egregious offenders can be prosecuted.

- Given the value that Morocco evidently places on projecting the image of a modern, liberal state, as well as the technical difficulties that would be inherent in an effort to surveil or crack down heavily on the large number of bloggers and Internet users who cross traditional red lines, Morocco is unlikely in the long term to engage in draconian filtering or surveillance regimes.
- While the regime will almost certainly continue to harass and make examples of those it thinks have gone too far, doing so will engender further opposition from within and greater international pressure to avoid such actions as imprisoned bloggers and journalists become causes celebres.

[\[a\]](#) For a more thorough examination of deteriorating press freedoms in Morocco, see the 20 April 2009 OSC Report, **Moroccan Media Freedom Deteriorating Despite Journalists' Efforts** ([GMP20090420260001](#)).

[\[b\]](#) For more information Moroccan's use of the Internet, see the 16 November 2009 OSC Media Survey Report, **Morocco** ([FEA20091116975161](#)).

[\[c\]](#) For further reporting on the *Facebook* arrest, see the 29 February 2008 OSC Report, **Morocco -- Bloggers Concerned for Free Speech After Facebook Arrest** ([GMP20080229420002](#)).

[\[1\]](#) [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Maghreb Arabe Presse | Daily Director condemned to three months in prison | 16 November 2009 | | http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/general/daily_director_conde/view | 7 January 2010 | Rabat Maghreb Arabe Presse in Arabic -- State-owned, government-controlled news agency MAP, and as such is widely read by the political elite and embassies. Also publishes in French, English, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Korean; URL: <http://www.map.ma>]

[\[2\]](#) [Open Source (Not OSC) | | TelQuel | A Step Too Far | 3 October | | http://www.telquel-online.com/392/couverture_392.shtml | 4 January 2010 |]

[\[3\]](#) [Open Source (Not OSC) | | TelQuel | A Step Too Far | 3 October | | http://www.telquel-online.com/392/couverture_392.shtml | 4 January 2010 |]

[\[4\]](#) [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Bakchich | Freedom of the Press Scoffed at in Morocco | 21 October 2009 | | <http://www.bakchich.info/La-liberte-de-la-presse-bafouee-au,08998.htm> | 17 December 2009 |]

[5] [OSC | | GMP20090908950022 | 7 September 2009 | | Moroccan journalists investigated by police over articles on king's health | | (U) | (U) | Casablanca Al-Ahdath al-Maghribiyah Online in Arabic -- Website of the independent, popular, general interest daily which focuses more on social events than political issues; Run by former socialists, it is very sympathetic with the Arabic secularist elite; Launched in 1998, it has a circulation of 22,536; URL: <http://www.ahdath.info>]

[6] [Online Publication | | Bakchich.info | Muhammad VI: The king who didn't want to be king | 21 December 2008 | | <http://www.bakchich.info/Mohammed-VI-Le-roi-qui-ne-voulait,06269.html> | 5 January 2009 | Paris bakchich.info in French -- independent news website; URL: <http://www.bakchich.info/>]

[7] [Internet Site | | OpenNet Initiative | Morocco | 6 August 2009 | | <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/morocco> | 22 December 2009 |]

[8] [Online Publication | | Bakchich.info | Muhammad VI: The king who didn't want to be king | 21 December 2008 | | <http://www.bakchich.info/Mohammed-VI-Le-roi-qui-ne-voulait,06269.html> | 5 January 2009 | Paris bakchich.info in French -- independent news website; URL: <http://www.bakchich.info/>]

[9] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | A Moroccan About the World About Him | | 7 January 2010 | | <http://cabalamuse.wordpress.com/> | 7 January 2010 |]

[10] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Ibn Kafka's Obiter Dicta: Divagations d'un juriste marocain en liberte surveillee | | 7 January 2010 | | <http://ibnkafkasobiterdicta.wordpress.com/> | 7 January 2010 |]

[11] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Agora | | 7 January 2010 | | <http://www.monagora.fr/> | 7 January 2010 |]

[12] [OSC | | GMP20090806950024 | 5 August 2009 | | Abu Dhabi Report Says Moroccan Dissent Alive on Twitter | | (U) | (U) | Abu Dhabi The National Online in English -- Website of leading government-owned daily; URL: <http://www.thenational.ae/>]

[13] [Internet Site | | A Moroccan About the World About Him | | Sadly Announce The Arrest of A Moroccan Blogger | 12 December | | <http://cabalamuse.wordpress.com/2009/12/12/i-sadly-announce-the-arrest-of-a-moroccan-blogger/> | 7 January 2010 |]

[14] [OSC | | GMP20091217950040 | 17 December 2009 | | Algerian Paper Reports Moroccan Blogger Jailed For Four Months | | (U) | (U) | Le Matin in French -- Website of defunct newspaper that ceased publication in 2003 when banned after its director Muhammad Benchicou, a fierce critic of President Bouteflika, was jailed on what were generally regarded as trumped-up charges; widely popular and anti-Islamist; <http://www.lematindz.net>]

[15] [Internet Site | | A Moroccan About the World About Him | | Sadly Announce The Arrest of A Moroccan Blogger | 12 December | | <http://cabalamuse.wordpress.com/2009/12/12/i-sadly-announce-the-arrest-of-a-moroccan-blogger/> | 7 January 2010 |]

[16] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Le Matin Du Sahara et Maghreb | "Facebook Mania" 'In Morocco | 2 December 2009 | OSC Report: Moroccan Media Freedom Deteriorating Despite Journalists' Efforts | <http://www.lematin.ma/Actualite/Journal/Article.asp?origine=jrn&idr=116&id=123910> | 7 January 2010 | Casablanca Le Matin Du Sahara et Maghreb Online in French -- Website of Pro-palace daily owned by Maroc Soir Group; editorial stance reflects perspective of palace and 'makhzen'; URL: <http://www.lematin.ma>]

[17] [Online Publication | | Larbi.org | 2009: Annus Horribilis for Freedom of Expression in Morocco | 28 December 2009 | | <http://www.larbi.org/post/2009/12/2009%2C-annus-horribilis-pour-la-libert%C3%A9-d%E2%80%99expression-au-Maroc> | 4 January 2009 |]

[18] [Internet Site | | Mon Agora | Another conviction for Moroccan media | 19 November 2009 | | <http://www.monagora.fr/2009/11/19/encore-une-condamnation-de-la-presse-marocaine/> | 5 January 2010 |]

[19] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Reporters Without Borders | Tension affects news conference in Casablanca in support of Moroccan media | 28 October 2009 | | <http://www.rsf.org/Tension-affects-news-conference-in.html> | 30 December 2009 |]

[20] [OSC | | GMP20100107950006 | 6 January 2010 | | Moroccan journalists' jail sentence dropped on appeal, fines reduced - paper | | (U) | (U) | Casablanca Al-Ahdath al-Maghribiyah Online in Arabic -- Website of the independent, popular, general interest daily which focuses more on social events than political issues; Run by former socialists, it is very sympathetic with the Arabic secularist elite; Launched in 1998, it has a circulation of 22,536; URL: <http://www.ahdath.info>]

[21] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Maghreb Arabe Presse | Prince Moulay Ismail abandons action against daily director and cartoonist, his lawyer says | 29 December 2009 | | http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/general/prince_moulay_ismail/view | 7 January 2010 | Rabat Maghreb Arabe Presse in Arabic -- State-owned, government-controlled news agency MAP, and as such is widely read by the political elite and embassies. Also publishes in French, English, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Korean; URL: <http://www.map.ma>]

[22] [Open Source (Not OSC) | | Maghreb Arabe Presse | Morocco in pivotal position in human rights promotion (Amnesty) | 17 December 2009 | | http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/social/morocco_in_pivotal_p/view | 30 December 2009 | Rabat Maghreb Arabe Presse in Arabic -- State-owned, government-controlled news agency MAP, and as such is widely read by the political elite and embassies. Also publishes in French, English, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Korean; URL: <http://www.map.ma>]

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