

MOROCCO

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



(Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images)



INTRODUCTION

Civic space in Morocco is severely restricted. Independent media, journalists and human rights defenders are harassed and prosecuted, often on spurious charges. Freedom of expression is strictly [limited](#) and those who criticise the government or the monarchy, or question Morocco's territorial integrity, are likely to be arrested and imprisoned. Laws related to the COVID-19 public health emergency have been used as a pretext to further [restrict](#) freedom of expression.

Three leading journalists, Taoufik Bouachrine, Omar Radi and Souleiman Raissouni, are currently imprisoned on [trumped up sex-related charges](#), a move intended to isolate them and tarnish their reputations. Morocco's last independent publication, Akhbar Al Yaoum, was forced to [end its activities](#) in March 2021, after being denied aid and after its founder and leading reporters were judicially harassed and imprisoned.

Social media commentators and bloggers have been prosecuted and [imprisoned](#) for publishing content on Facebook or YouTube critical of the government or the monarch.

Morocco has been implicated in Amnesty International's [investigation](#) into Pegasus spyware, sold to states by Israel's NSO group. Several journalists have been targeted with the surveillance tool, both inside and outside Morocco.

LGBTQI+ rights are restricted and homosexuality and consensual same-sex relations are criminalised. Recently, a book on LGBTQI+ issues was [withdrawn](#) from the Rabat Book Fair following a social media campaign.

Morocco exercises even stricter control over Western Sahara, also known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Most of this disputed area is under de facto Moroccan administration. Sahrawi activists, human rights defenders and journalists are brutally [harassed, arrested and imprisoned](#), often for long spells and in inhumane detention conditions.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Morocco as “**Obstructed**”.

The data is generated through a collaboration with more than 20 civil society research partners, and input from a number of independent human rights evaluations. The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN

This brief was prepared by Francesca Pierigh in collaboration with the CIVICUS Monitor.



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

While freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution, under the Penal Code the criticism of Islam, the monarch or the government's position on territory and the Western Sahara is [criminalised](#) and punishable with fines and prison time of up to six years.

A Press and Publications Code was [adopted](#) in 2016. It provides for freedom of expression for the press and applies to journalists accredited by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The Press and Publications Code does not include prison terms as punishments, but it allows authorities to close [publications](#) 'prejudicial to Islam, the monarchy, territorial integrity, or public order'. The granting of accreditation for journalists by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport is arbitrary, can take a long time and can be denied.

The Law on Combating Terrorism [includes](#) overly broad terms that have been used to prosecute journalists who have, for example, interviewed stakeholders linked to terrorist groups or published material on the topic of terrorism. The same law [gives](#) the authorities the power to delete content believed to 'disrupt public order by intimidation, force, violence, fear, or terror'.

The crackdown on freedom of expression has [significantly](#) worsened over the past five years, especially after protests in northern Morocco in 2016 and 2017. In October 2016, spurred by the death of Mohsin Fekri, a fish vendor in the city of Al Hoceima, Moroccans started to hold weekly demonstrations to protest against Morocco's socio-economic situation and the corruption of public officials. The protests came to be known as the Hirak protest movement. In June 2017, the authorities launched a violent crackdown and arrested hundreds of activists and protesters.

Spurious charges are often [brought](#) against journalists, human rights defenders and social media commentators to threaten, silence and imprison them.

Media pluralism is in decline. The country's last independent publication, the Arabic language media Akhbar Al Yaoum, closed down in March 2021, after its founder and other key members were judicially harassed for years and finally imprisoned. The publication, which had been active since 2009 and was critical of the government, was [deprived](#) of all state-sector advertising and did not receive any state aid, which was offered to media outlets as a response to COVID-19.

Journalist Mohamed Boutaam was [arrested](#) in May 2021 after accusing a local business leader of corruption. He was charged with 'interfering in a government job without authorisation', which can carry up to five years in prison. He is currently being held in pretrial detention. Boutaam is the director of the private local news media outlet Tizpress and has worked with international media, including Al-Jazeera, speaking out against corruption.

Maati Monjib, an academic, journalist and human rights defender, with dual Moroccan and French nationality, has been judicially [harassed](#) since 2015. Monjib is the founding member of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism, and has been a critical voice for many years, speaking up against the government's corruption and human rights abuses. He is also the president of Freedom Now, civil society organisation (CSO) that defends freedom of expression and journalism in Morocco. In 2015 he was charged with 'endangering state security' after he received funding from a Dutch CSO to develop training for journalists. His trial was postponed seven times until October 2020, when new charges of embezzlement and money laundering were added to his case. Monjib was also targeted with surveillance, including through Pegasus spyware, and smear campaigns. In January 2021, he was sentenced to a year in prison on charges of 'fraud' and 'undermining internal state security'. In March 2021, he went on [hunger strike](#) but stopped after 20 days when he was granted provisional release. In October 2021, he was prevented from travelling to France to visit his family and receive treatment for medical issues due to his hunger strikes.



The use of morality charges to target journalists

Among the spurious charges used to target and harass journalists, recent years have seen the use of [‘morality’](#) charges: accusations of gendered, sex-related crimes intended to isolate journalists and tarnish their reputations. These charges include sexual assault, rape, illegal abortion and human trafficking. They are often accompanied by smear campaigns by pro-government media. These charges are usually based on weak evidence and judicial processes are marked by irregularities and the denial of fair trial rights.

Those journalists who are targeted are known up to speak against the monarchy, the government and their business interests. Khadija Ryadi, former heard of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, has [denounced](#) the use of these charges, as have feminist organisations inside Morocco. Khmissa, a feminist collective, condemned ‘the exploitation of women by a government mouthpiece purely in order to wreak revenge on rights activists’.

Taoufik Bouachrine, the founder of Akhbar Al Yaoum, was [sentenced](#) to 12 years in prison in 2018 on charges of human trafficking, abuse of power for sexual purposes, rape and attempted rape. He has repeatedly denied these charges. In October 2019, his sentence was prolonged by three years and he also received a heavy fine. His detention was deemed [arbitrary](#) by the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

Among the women who were alleged to have brought sex charges against Bouachrine was [Afaf Bernani](#), a former journalist at Akhbar Al Yaoum. She was interrogated the day after Bouachrine’s arrest in relation to the alleged rape of another colleague. As reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists, she stated that after consistently denying that charge, police falsified her testimony and included her as a victim of rape as well. She testified to this in court and as a result was sentenced to six months in prison on the grounds of ‘false communication and slander’. She [believed](#) that her sentencing was meant to intimidate the other women who were supposed to give testimony. ‘Not only does this trivialize sexual violence, but it spells a troubling future for press freedom in Morocco’, Bernani [stated](#) in an opinion article for The Washington Post. After being charged, she was placed under constant surveillance and ultimately decided to leave Morocco.

Souleiman Raissouni, who became editor in chief of Akhbar Al Yaoum after the arrest of Bouachrine, was [arrested](#) in Casablanca in May 2020 after a young man accused him of attempted rape. He was charged with ‘indecent assault with violence and sequestration’. He has always refuted the charges. Detained since his arrest, he was [sentenced](#) in July 2021 to five years in prison and the payment of a fine, following a trial marred by irregularities. Raissouni did not attend the trial because of his deteriorating health after staging a 122-days hunger strike. His request to be transported to the court in an ambulance and attend the trial in a wheelchair was denied. In February 2022, the Court of Appeal [upheld](#) the full sentence.

Hajar Raissouni, reporter for Akhbar Al Yaoum and the niece of Souleiman Raissouni, was [arrested](#) in 2019 and accused of seeking an ‘illegal abortion’ and of ‘sexual relations outside marriage’. She was questioned on her and her family’s activities and subjected to a non-consensual gynaecological examination. In September 2019, she was sentenced to a year in prison. In October 2019, she was granted a royal pardon and released from prison.



Omar Radi is an investigative reporter and an outspoken critic of government corruption. He has focused much of his work on uncovering evidence of misconduct among government officials. He was judicially harassed by the authorities for years. In March 2020, he was [sentenced](#) to a four-month suspended prison sentence and a fine for a 2019 tweet in which he criticised the action of a judge regarding a sentence against Hirak movement activists. In June 2020, Amnesty International [revealed](#) that Radi had been targeted with surveillance through Pegasus spyware several times during 2019 and 2020. After the revelations were made public, Radi was [accused](#) of espionage in June 2020 and has been targeted with a defamation campaign. A few weeks later, he was [questioned](#) in connection with charges of ‘rape’ and ‘sexual harassment’ brought by a former female colleague. He was detained in July 2020 and held in pretrial detention in solitary confinement. In July 2021, a first instance court sentenced him to six years in prison and a fine for espionage and rape. The sentence was upheld in full by an appeal court in March 2022. Amnesty International [called out](#) the ‘grossly unfair trial’, which included limited access for Radi to his lawyer and the denial of fair trial rights.

Radi’s colleague, Imad Stitou, an independent journalist covering human rights issues, was initially [questioned](#) in 2020 in connection with Radi’s rape charges and confirmed that the relation between Radi and the colleague who was allegedly raped was consensual. Soon after Stitou was charged with ‘failure to report a crime’. In proceedings equally marked by unfairness and irregularities, a court convicted Stitou in July 2021. In March 2022 Stitou’s one-year prison sentence with six months suspended was upheld by an appeal court.

Surveillance

In July 2021, an [investigation](#) by Amnesty International, Forbidden Stories and several media partners revealed that Pegasus spyware had been used to target the activities and communications of journalists and activists globally. The government of Morocco was implicated from the beginning, allegedly targeting Moroccan and foreign phone numbers belonging to journalists, activists and political figures.

Among the [targets](#) were journalists Ali Amar, Taoufik Bouachrine, Maria Moukrim and Souleimane Raissouni, along with Aboubakr Jamaï and Hicham Mansouri, both journalists in exile in France, along with several others. Amnesty International has [verified](#) the use of Pegasus spyware to target human rights defenders in Morocco since 2017. One of the targets was activist and academic Maati Monjib. Omar Radi was also [targeted](#) in June 2020.

While the Moroccan government denies all allegations of surveillance and the use of Pegasus spyware, recent revelations showed that Sahrawi human rights defender Aminatou Haidar was [targeted](#) with Pegasus spyware in November 2021, several months after the use of Pegasus was globally reported. Sahrawi activist Mahjoub Maliha and the partner of Sahrawi activist Naama Asfari were also [targeted](#) with Pegasus spyware.

The Moroccan Ministry of Interior was also previously [implicated](#) as a client of Circles, a surveillance company with links to NSO that exploits weaknesses in the global mobile phone system to track calls, texts and the location of phones around the world.

Crackdown on social media

Social media is another area where Moroccans are unable to fully exercise their freedom of expression. Since September 2019, Moroccan authorities have arrested and prosecuted dozens of activists, artists and citizens for expressing critical views on social media platforms. They have been [prosecuted](#) under the Penal Code on charges such as ‘lack of due respect for the king’, ‘defaming state institutions’, and ‘offending public officials’.



In March 2020, the Moroccan government approved a bill on the use of social and open broadcasting and similar networks. The bill [criminalised](#) the dissemination of ‘false information’, a term that was vaguely defined, and calls to boycott commercial products on social media or in public. Strongly criticised by CSOs, the bill [provided](#) penalties of up to three years in prison and fines of up to 50,000 MAD (approx. US\$5,000). It was seen as a response to the 2018 ‘Moukation’ [boycott campaign](#), which targeted three large companies producing milk, water and petrol. Following strong opposition by human rights CSOs and some parliamentarians, the bill was temporarily [suspended](#) in May 2020. The bill remains suspended at the time of writing.

In April 2022, social media commentator Rabie al-Ablaq was [sentenced](#) to four years in prison on charges of ‘disrespecting the king’ under the Penal Code. In September and November 2021, he [posted](#) videos on Facebook and YouTube where he commented on recent political events. He was prosecuted in relation to these videos, for addressing the king informally and for questioning the wealth of the king compared to Morocco’s poverty. Al-Ablaq was previously active in the Hirak movement in northern Morocco in 2016 and 2017. In 2017, he was prosecuted for commentary published in support of the protests and sentenced to five years in prison. He was released in 2020 following a royal pardon, after carrying out several hunger strikes while imprisoned.

Saida El Alami, blogger, social media commentator, human rights activist and member of the collective Femmes Marocaines Contre la Detention Politique (Moroccan Women Against Political Detention) was arrested on 23 March 2022. She was [accused](#) of ‘insulting public officials while carrying out their duties’, ‘contempt of judicial decisions’ and ‘broadcasting and distributing false allegations without consent’ under the Penal Code. The charges relate to social media posts in which she expressed criticism of the Moroccan government and security services. She did not have access to a lawyer for the first 10 days of her detention. In April 2022, she was sentenced by the Casablanca Court of First Instance to two years in prison.

Mohamed Bouzlouf, a blogger who expressed solidarity with El Alami in a Facebook post, [was arrested](#) on 26 March 2022. He was charged with ‘undermining established institutions’, ‘influencing justice’ and ‘prejudicing legal decisions’ under the Penal Code. He was sentenced to two months in prison and a fine by a court in Ouarzazate.

In March 2022, Brahim Nafai, philosophy teacher and national secretary of the youth wing of the political party Annahj Addimocraty (The Democratic Way), was [interrogated](#) by police for over three hours over a Facebook post in which he called for a three-day boycott on buying fuel. His Facebook account was suspended after the post was reported, and later when he regained access, the post had been deleted.

In February 2022, Abderrazak Boughanbour, former president of the Moroccan League for the Defence of Human Rights, was [summoned](#) for police interrogation. The summons related to a post he shared several times on Facebook calling for protest for political reforms. He was interrogated for over three hours about the posts, as well as his career and his involvement in human rights activism.

Activist Jamila Saadane was [arrested](#) in August 2021 after posting a video on YouTube in which she accused Moroccan authorities of covering up prostitution and human trafficking networks under the guise of tourism activities in Marrakesh. In September 2021, she was [sentenced](#) to three months in prison on charges of ‘insulting institutions’ and ‘spreading false information’.

YouTube commentator Mustapha Semlali, known as Allal El Kadouss, was [sentenced](#) in July 2021 to two years in prison on charges of ‘undermining the monarchy’ after posting a video in which he accused the king’s brother of wrongdoing.



In April 2019, Italian-Moroccan student Ikram Nazih shared a post on Facebook satirising Quranic verses. In June 2021, when she arrived at Rabat airport to visit her family, she was [arrested](#). She did not know that there was an arrest warrant against her. She was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison and fined for ‘insulting the Islamic religion’, before being released in August 2021 after the [intervention](#) of Italian authorities.

Moroccan-American YouTube commentator Chafik Omerani was [arrested](#) in February 2021 and sentenced to three months in prison, and a fine, for publishing ‘a series of videos containing insulting and defamatory expressions against constitutional institutions, organized establishments and public officials’.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The constitution provides for the right to freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration, although arbitrary restrictions are routinely reported. The law [provides](#) that groups of more than three people require an authorisation from the Ministry of Interior to engage in a public protest, a measure which is seen as a way to delay, discourage and ultimately suppress peaceful assemblies. Many protests are carried out without authorisation, and security forces [occasionally](#) intervene to disband protests, both authorised and unauthorised, when they are considered a threat to ‘public security’.

Since March 2020, Morocco adopted a state of health emergency to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. The state of emergency has been extended several times, with the [recent extension](#) lasting until 31st October 2022. The state of emergency [includes](#) restrictions on civic space, with imprisonment and fines for those who contravene the decree or incite others to contravene the decree through speech or threats uttered in a public space or in meetings, written or printed materials, photos, posters, audiovisual or electronic communications, or any other means.

In February 2022, Moroccans [protested](#) in several cities against rising fuel and food prices, and to mark the anniversary of the 20 February 2011 movement, which called for democratic reforms.

In July 2021, the food cart of Yassine Lekhmidi, a 25-year old man, was [confiscated](#) because he was not wearing a face mask. His cart was not returned even after he paid a fine. Lekhmidi self-immolated and died of his injuries. His death prompted protests in the city of Sidi Bennour, but they did not have a nationwide impact.

In July 2021, activist Nouredine Aouaj [joined](#) a peaceful demonstration in support of journalists Omar Radi and Suleiman Raissouni. He was arrested and [sentenced](#) to two years in prison on charges of ‘insulting constitutional institutions, principles and symbols of the kingdom’, ‘denouncing fictitious crimes’ and ‘undermining judicial authority’.

A peaceful protest organised by a group of teachers in Rabat in April 2021, with the aim of demanding better working conditions, was abruptly interrupted by the intervention of law enforcement officers. 33 teachers were arbitrarily [arrested](#) on charges of taking part in an ‘unauthorized gathering’, violating ‘health emergency’ law and ‘harming’ and ‘insulting’ law enforcement officers. One of them was also accused of ‘offending public officials’. Teachers have been protesting in Morocco to demand better contracts and working conditions since 2019, with police often using excessive force to disperse the protests.



FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Legislation regulating the establishment of associations includes overly broad and vague terms that can be used to [restrict and hinder](#) the activities of organisations. The government has denied registration to CSOs deemed to advocate against Islam or question the monarchy and Morocco's territorial integrity. Saharawi human rights groups are routinely denied registration. The government has also delayed and obstructed the registration of organisations perceived to be critical of the authorities through administrative barriers. CSOs are allowed to receive funding from abroad but have to report the amount and its origins to the government within 30 days of the receipt of the funds.

When an organisation applies for registration, local authorities are [supposed](#) to issue a temporary receipt as soon as the documentation required is submitted. The temporary receipt is to be replaced by a permanent receipt within 60 days, although there have been many instances when the issuing of the receipts has been delayed or did not happen. Not receiving a formal recognition of the application process can be an administrative barrier; nevertheless, organisations can operate even if they do not receive the receipt, unless there is a formal rejection of the documentation provided.

The Moroccan Association for Human Rights, Morocco's largest human rights CSO, is frequently [obstructed](#) in its work by the government. Authorities cancel events organised by the association and its local branches and [hinder](#) its abilities to rent spaces and open bank accounts.

LGBTQI+ Rights

Article 489 of the Penal Code [criminalises](#) 'lewd or unnatural acts with an individual of the same sex', and same-sex relations are punishable by imprisonment of up to three years and fines. Although the law is sporadically enforced, LGBTQI+ people face stigma and discrimination. Despite frequent episodes of abuses and violations against LGBTQI+ people, organisations advocating for the rights and visibility of LGBTQI+ people are [increasing](#) their advocacy and activities.

In June 2022, the book 'Lesbian Diaries' by Fatima Zahra Amzkar was removed from the Rabat Book Fair by the Moroccan Ministry of Culture. After the publication of promotional material to announce a book signing at the fair, a [campaign](#) started on social media with hashtags such as #NoToHomosexuality. The Ministry's decision came after the campaign began, although the Ministry said that the book was never allowed at the fair in the first place. The novel deals with the struggles and abuses faced by LGBTQI+ people in Morocco. Author Amzkar described receiving insults and death threats following the announcement.

In July 2021, an [article](#) on the Civil Status Bill adopted by parliament provided for the possibility of recognising gender change. However, the amendment was criticised by trans rights groups in the country because it included the term 'hermaphrodite', which many considered offensive, and only provided for a male or female gender to be assigned to intersex people. It did not recognise transition by transgender people, who were not mentioned in the law.

In February 2021, gender non-conforming artist Abdelatif Nhaila was [released](#) from prison. They were arrested in 2020 at a police station when they went to report death threats and homophobic harassment, part of a smear campaign on social media. They were charged with 'violating the state of health emergency' and 'insulting an official'.

In April 2020, an [online harassment campaign](#) outed LGBTQI+ people using same-sex dating apps, disclosing their sexual orientation and gender identity without their consent. Many people [created](#) fake accounts on the apps and shared social media photos of app users, including insults and threats, due to their perceived sexual orientation. As a result, some LGBTQI+ people lost the support of their families and in some cases were kicked out of their homes during the pandemic.



WESTERN SAHARA

[Western Sahara](#), a former Spanish colony, was annexed by Morocco in 1975 and has been disputed territory ever since. The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic was declared by the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (POLISARIO Front) in 1976. A 16-year-long war between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front ended in a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991. A vote on Sahrawi self-determination, which should include independence as an option, as agreed in the ceasefire, has not yet taken place. The UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, MINURSO, does not have a human rights mandate.

In November 2020, an incident at a border crossing reignited the conflict between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front. Since then, Moroccan security forces have increased their [crackdown](#) on protesters, brutally suppressing mostly peaceful protests organised by pro-independence activists, beating individual protesters and passers-by, raiding homes and arresting perceived POLISARIO Front supporters.

[Restrictions](#) on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression in Western Sahara are even greater than those imposed in Morocco. Disproportionate force is used by Moroccan security forces to disperse protesters and house raids are conducted without warrants. Protesters, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists are subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention, unlawful surveillance, harassment and intimidation.

The Moroccan Press Code, as well as its Penal Code, criminalise the challenging of Morocco's 'territorial integrity', which makes the work of journalists and media in Western Sahara seriously [restricted](#). Sahrawi journalists are routinely harassed and detained and Moroccan journalists covering Western Sahara are extremely constrained in their work.

Human rights groups and organisations in Western Sahara are considered advocates for self-determination and separatists, and Morocco [denies their registration](#). No human rights group in Western Sahara is officially registered as a CSO, despite some having tried to.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders issued a communication in July 2021 highlighting the harassment of human rights defenders working on issues related to the Western Sahara and urged the government of Morocco to immediately cease the targeting. According to the statement, activists working on self-determination and human rights in Western Sahara [face](#) 'intimidation, harassment, death threats, criminalisation, physical and sexual assault, threats of rape and surveillance'.

'Not only do human rights defenders working on issues related to human rights in Morocco and Western Sahara continue to be wrongfully criminalised for their legitimate activities, they receive disproportionately long prison sentences and whilst imprisoned, they are subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and torture', [said](#) UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Mary Lawlor.

Sultana Khaya and her family have been [prevented](#) from leaving their home for over a year. Khaya is renowned human rights defender and the president of the League for the Defence of Human Rights and Protection of Natural Resources in Boujdour. She works on women's rights and the rights of self-determination of Sahrawi people. Law enforcement officers have been stationed outside her residence since November 2020 in what amounts to de facto house arrest, without providing any legal explanation. Khaya and her family have been subjected to threats and physical attacks when attempting to leave the house, and visitors have also been prevented from entering Khaya's house. Her elderly mother and her siblings have been physically attacked by security forces who raided her house. Khaya, her sister and her elderly mother were [sexually assaulted](#) by Moroccan security forces on several occasions in 2021.



Over the course of two days in April 2022, five Sahrawi women human rights defenders were brutally [assaulted](#) after their participation in peaceful protests for self-determination and to express support for Sultana Khaya. The five women, Nasrathum (Hajatna) Babi, Zeinab Babi, Embarka Al Hafidhi, Fatima al-Hafidhi and Oum Al Moumin Al Kharashi, were heading towards Khaya's house to join a peaceful protest. Zeinab Babi was [attacked](#) by police officers, interrogated about her activism and brutally assaulted. She had to go to the hospital for her injuries, which included a broken hand. Embarka Al-Hafidhi was stopped on her way to Khaya's house and beaten and sexually assaulted by plainclothes agents.

Babouzeid Mohamad Said Labbihi was [stopped](#) by traffic officers in January 2022 while in his car with his son. He was insulted, threatened with accusations of assaulting public officials, interrogated on the spot and finally charged with a traffic violation and a fine. In May 2021, Labbihi was kidnapped and tortured by security intelligence officer. Labbihi is the director of the Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders. He works on Sahrawi people's right to self-determination and documents abuses committed by Moroccan security forces.

In September 2021, Mahfouda Bamba Lefkire was scheduled to meet with members of the Gdeim Izik Peaceful Movement at her residence to discuss how to support Sultana Khaya. Moroccan police insulted, [physically attacked](#) and blocked the members arriving, preventing the meeting from taking place. Lefkire, her daughter and husband were forcefully dragged outside her house and then dragged back in. Her electricity supply was cut. Lefkire is a prominent human rights defender and member of the Gdeim Izik Peaceful Movement, and is active in the El Ayoun human rights community. She has been continuously harassed by Moroccan security forces for her participation in peaceful demonstrations on self-determination in Western Sahara.

Essabi Yahdih, blogger, journalist and director of the online Al-Gargarat media network, was [arrested](#) at his workplace in May 2021. He was interrogated about his journalistic work and accused of filming military barracks in Dakhla. He was subjected to mental and physical torture and denied medical attention. In July 2021, he was [sentenced](#) to a year in prison and a fine.

Sahrawi journalist Mohamed Lamin Haddi was arrested in November 2010 after covering the use of force by Morocco to dismantle a protest outside Western Sahara. He was tried by a military court and sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2014 on the charge of 'violence with intent to kill officials carrying out their duties'. Since 2017, he has been held in [solitary confinement](#), and visits by his family and lawyer have been banned since March 2020. Haddi worked for RASD TV, a channel run by the POLISARIO Front, and is a member of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State. In January 2021, he [began a hunger strike](#) to highlight his mistreatment in detention. The hunger strike resulted in Haddi being force-fed. In March 2022, shortly after he announced that he planned another hunger strike to protest against his detention conditions, prison guards entered his cell, beat him with batons and forcefully cut his beard.

[Several more instances](#) of surveillance, harassment and physical attacks of Sahrawi activists, journalists and human rights defenders by Moroccan security forces have been [documented](#), particularly since the renewal of conflict between the POLISARIO Front and Morocco in November 2020.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Morocco

- Respect the right to peaceful assembly and ensure that security forces respond to ongoing and future protests in line with the country's international human rights obligations
- Immediately release all journalists and activists imprisoned on political charges solely for exercising their freedom of expression. Ensure that just reparations and public apologies are made for each case.
- Immediately cease the prosecution of journalists, social media commentators and activist citizens for exercising their freedom of expression, including through the use of the Penal Code and the Press and Publications Code.
- Immediately cease the use of morality charges and the instrumentalisation of laws intended to protect women's rights to criminalise freedom of expression.
- Remove overly broad and vague terminology from the Penal Code and the Press and Publications Code.
- Ensure that the Law on Anti-Terrorism is not used to prosecute freedom of expression.
- Withdraw the draft bill on social media and refrain from attempts to criminalise freedom of expression on social media.
- Immediately abandon the use of Pegasus spyware and any other illegitimate surveillance tool currently in use.
- Ensure that fair trial rights are guaranteed at all stages of the judicial process and allow the presence of observers at trials of journalists and activists.
- Ensure the right to peaceful assembly and refrain from using excessive force to disperse demonstrations.
- Ensure that human rights organisations and CSOs are able to operate fully and freely.
- Immediately cease the de facto house arrests of Sahrawi human rights defenders.
- Allow access by independent human rights monitors to the territory of Western Sahara and support the addition of a human rights monitoring mandate to the UN mission MINURSO.
- Remove the Penal Code provision criminalising same-sex relations and ensure equal rights for LGBTQI+ people.
- Create an enabling environment for journalists, activists, bloggers and civil society groups to operate without fear of reprisals, intimidation and harassment.



















Filipinos Protest Against President Duterte (Photo by Jes Aznar/Getty Images)