

Moroccan Media Sail In Muddy Waters

*By Brahim Echaabi**

Idriss Chahtan was released from the harsh conditions of a Moroccan jail on a Friday night in June 2010, just hours before his wife gave birth to their second child, and after learning that he had been granted an unexpected pardon by King Mohammed VI, the very monarch who had been the cause of Chahtan's imprisonment eight months earlier.

When the palace announced in 2009 that the king was suffering from a minor infection, Chahtan, director and editor of the independent weekly *Al-Mishaal*, published a few articles that raised questions about the seriousness of his condition.

Unfortunately for Chahtan, Morocco is a country where even the most minor comment about a member of the royal family can easily turn into a legal nightmare. Chahtan was convicted in October 2009 of "publishing false information" and was given a one-year prison sentence.

Government Pardons as a Smokescreen

Chahtan had company in jail. In the last two years, the Moroccan government has been particularly active in prosecuting independent reporters whom it deems critical of its actions and policies.

International pressure from organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters without Borders that demanded Chahtan's freedom might have contributed to the granting of the pardon. However, other observers think the pardon was only a smokescreen in the government's campaign to convince the world that progress was being made in some areas of human rights in the last decade while, in fact, conditions for the free press actually continue to worsen.

Taoufik Bouachrine, editor of the newspaper *Akhbar al-Youm*, told CPJ that the pardon was a strategy to distract the attention from the way reporters were being treated. "The day before Chahtan's pardon was issued, I was sentenced to six months in prison," he said.

Harsh fines, blackouts, seizing copies of newspapers and shutting down publications are part of the strategy against media outlets that publish anything that might be remotely controversial, from stories covering a protest to a cartoon about a royal wedding. Also, editions of foreign publications, such as *Le Monde* and *El País*, have been banned and *Al Jazeera's* operations were suspended in October 2010 for their alleged "unfair" coverage.

The seizure and destruction of 100,000 copies of the local magazines *TelQuel* and *Nichanein* 2009 exemplify the extent of the repression. The magazines published the results of a poll concerning the 10-year reign of King Mohammed VI and revealed that Moroccans overwhelmingly found his rule “positive.” Even so, the government said, “the monarchy in Morocco cannot be the object of a debate, even by opinion poll.”

Even Journalists May Be Compromised

When it comes to legal harassment, sometimes the charges against journalists relate directly to their publications. But, according to CPJ’s website, some reporters are charged for alleged criminal activity that appears to be unrelated to their work, such as computer theft or real estate fraud. Bouachrine, the editor for *Akhbar al-Youm*, for example, was convicted on the latter charge, even though previously, he had been declared innocent.

The fraud case was brought up for a second time eight months after Bouachrine received a four-year prison sentence for publishing a 2009 cartoon depicting the wedding of a cousin of the king. The cartoon was considered a show of “blatant disrespect to a member of the royal family” and an insult to the national flag. Bouachrine’s newspaper was then shut down.

However, accusing reporters of wrongdoing is where things get complicated in Morocco because, while the independent media circles are the first to defend their own colleagues — oftentimes with international backing — they also don’t deny that a sector of the media may themselves participate in the type of questionable practices they are supposed to expose.

Ngadi Abdellatif, a member of the executive office of Transparency Morocco and board member of the Central Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (ICPC — *Instance Centrale de Prévention de la Corruption*), believes that “overall, the Moroccan press is perceived and treated as combatants and as having integrity, but we must also recognize that corruption is practiced by some journalists. This is generally small-scale corruption.”

The National Union of the Moroccan Press (SNPM — *Syndicat National de la Presse Marocaine*) receives dozens of complaints from citizens requesting that action be taken against newspapers that had have allegedly published false information about them.

It is true that unhappy readers can be found wherever reporters are, but the 2009 report of the SNPM concluded that the press is “infested with a new generation of journalists who specialize in breaches of ethical standards with premeditation.” (The SNPM receives a yearly stipend from the government, but, nonetheless, it actively defends reporters suffering from government persecution.)

The president of the SNPM and vice-president of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Younes Mujahid, says: “Some Moroccan journalists who work with local authorities receive bribes. Worse yet, there are other forms of extortion practiced by journalists, and some of them have been sued by Moroccan courts for corruption, not to mention that funding for the press in Morocco lacks transparency.”

No specific cases of bribery or extortion against reporters have been proved so far, but this author has come across a few cases of reporters with modest education and small salaries who somehow own properties in expensive districts and whose writing praises certain people. On the other hand, reporters with higher incomes tend to own or rent small apartments.

Similar observations can be made about a number of publications that pay the salaries of many people, but don't seem to sell more than a few hundred copies a day or even a week.

A Moroccan entrepreneur in the seafood industry in the city of El Jadida, who preferred to remain anonymous, said a number of journalists and correspondents from Moroccan newspapers often ask for money, in exchange for writing about his business. These rogue correspondents, who work in El Jadida with national newspapers, ask for small sums of money ranging from 400 dirhams to 1,000 dirhams (US\$50 to US\$125).

Different Journalists, Different Views

These issues are a frequent topic of conversation among journalists. Rachid Nini, one of the top columnists in the country and who was himself convicted in 2008 for “insulting a judge,” does not hesitate to comment: “Journalism and the media are probably the most corrupt sectors in Morocco. You can count the honest journalists in Morocco with the fingers of one hand.”

Znaidi Mustafa, a member of the Moroccan press union, says members of the media are not exempt from the temptations of corruption. He believes some senior public officers bribe journalists to overlook abuses of power, or forego articles that would tarnish the officers' images.

In this tense and restrictive environment, it's not surprising that distrust among and about the media is increasingly a part of the equation.

Following Chahda's and other articles about the king's health, Nini criticized the use of anonymous sources and wrote in his column: “You journalists, no one understands what you want. If the palace decides to keep the health of the king confidential, that's a

disaster, and if the palace decides to make the king's health a public concern, that makes for two disasters."

Nini's comments soon became the subject of speculation in the popular Arabic online newspaper Hesperess, which went so far as to conduct a poll that asked, "To whom does Rachid Nini provide services?" Respondents had to choose from three possible answers: "to the nation," "to money," or "to the government." Over 6,000 people voted, and 60 percent of them chose the first option.

The question was a reference to the fact that Nini hasn't been forced to pay a fine of over 6 million dirhams (US\$730,000) that was part of his 2008 conviction, a fine that at the time was labeled "politically motivated" by the CPJ.

Nini's response, in a subsequent column, said that "my biggest crime is that I haven't held to the slogan 'support your brother whether he's right or wrong,' and that I do not stand by fellow journalists who are sued for what they have published about the king's health based on the Internet as a source."

Sadly, despite the substantial efforts and sacrifices made by many Moroccan reporters and organizations to freely practice professional journalism, the current state of affairs seems to only weaken the media's position and benefit the interests of a government that is set on hindering the development of independent journalism.

**Brahim Echaabi has more than 20 years of experience in journalism and is a communication researcher at the University of Malaga, Spain. He has a PhD in Communication and Multimedia and regularly contributes to Transparency Morocco. He is a member of the executive office of the League for Citizenship and Human Rights (LMCDH).*

