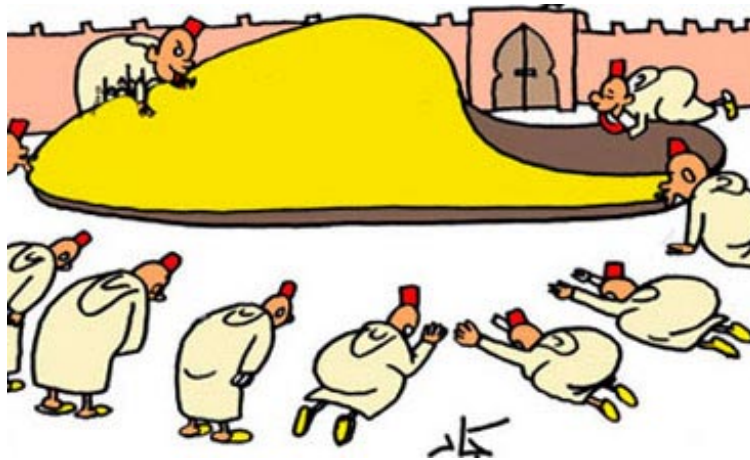


MOROCCO

Ali Lmrabet claims the freedom to write



Moroccan journalist Ali Lmrabet, 44, has paid a high price for the sensitivities of the young king Mohammed VI. His cartoons and articles (particularly on the monarchy and an interview raising the issue of Western Sahara) led to him being sentenced by the Rabat court on 21 May 2003 to four years in prison for "insulting the king's person", "threatening the integrity of the national territory" and "undermining the monarchy". His sentence was reduced on appeal to three years in jail. On Fête du Trône day on 30 July, Mohammed VI pardoned a large number of prisoners, but not the journalist.

A self-educated man, from a poor family, Lmrabet has a brilliant intellect, a love of literature and an elegant writing style. A former diplomat who turned to journalism, he preferred freedom of speech to the language of the diplomat and worked for several different Moroccan publications.

In 1999, he became correspondent for Reporters Without Borders. In March 2000, he founded the newspaper *Demain*. Its free expression quickly attracted a large readership. But the newspaper was banned for giving space to comments implicating the Moroccan left in the attempted coup against King Hassan II in 1972. The publication reappeared a few weeks later as *Demain magazine*. Boycotted by advertisers, with a reduced editorial team and using cheaper paper, it became despite everything the best selling weekly of the French-language press, thanks to its independence, satirical articles and humorous cartoons.

Political pressure continued however and it was suspended for several weeks. In January 2003, Lmrabet started *Douman*, an Arabic version of *Demain Magazine*, both now banned.

After a first hunger strike lasting 50 days this spring, that left him in weakened health, Lmrabet resumed his fast on 30 November. This determined Moroccan anti-authority figure continues to proclaim freedom of expression and refuses to give up his title of "King of the poor".

A telling symptom of the state of the press in Morocco ?



The case of Ali Lmrabet is symptomatic of the problems confronting the private press today. These include the lack of an independent justice system, the risks in raising sensitive Moroccan issues (such as the king's person or the Western Sahara question), prison sentences for press offences, the growing interference of the security apparatus, advertising boycotts and applying pressure to printers and advertisers. This last aspect is possibly the most effective unofficial weapon for silencing the independent press without resorting to any official censorship.

Less than a week after the 16 May Islamist bomb attacks in Casablanca that left 45 dead, Parliament unanimously approved without amendment the anti-terror draft law, which had been under examination since autumn 2002 and had provoked strong reactions from political parties, particularly within the Justice and Development Party (PJD). Issues such as definitions of terrorist, terrorist act, and "justifying terrorism", remained unclear and therefore particularly threatening to press freedom. This anti-terrorist law completed the 2001 press code as desired by the security-minded (interior ministry officials and the Moroccan secret service – DST). Since coming into force in June, it had increases jail sentences in the case of terrorism and facilitated investigations by allowing night searches, phone tapping and extending periods for which suspects could be held. Under cover of the anti-terror argument, convictions of journalists have been made easier and have increased.

While Mohammed VI has repeated his commitment to democracy and modernisation (proposing reform of the personal statute code, a real revolution!) he has also announced "the end of the era of leniency" and he has the press in his sights.

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