

The Independent Press after the "Moroccan Spring"

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Recommended Citation

Tayebi, Hamza (2015) "The Independent Press after the "Moroccan Spring"," *Mathal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/mathal/vol4/iss1/4>

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Abstract

The wave of Arab Spring that started in Tunisia and Egypt arrived to Morocco in 2011 paving the way to unprecedented organized mass-protests all over the country. Among the demands raised by the 20 February Movement protesters was the demand for free and independent media outlets, especially the press. King Mohammed VI, the Commander of the Faithful and the highest authority in Morocco, promised in a televised speech on March 9th to introduce "radical" and "genuine" constitutional reforms that would democratize the country. In fact, King Mohammed VI has so far succeeded in calming down and co-opting the demonstrations, but journalists and political activists still get fined if they trespass the *Hudud*[1]. In my short article, I will briefly contextualize the Moroccan independent press and discuss its status after the "Moroccan Spring" with an attempt to show, through cases of imprisoned journalists, the contradictions associated with the liberalization of speech in Morocco. One of the main arguments of my article is that the democratization of the press could never be achieved as long as the public discourse that brings monarchical powers and actions into question is illegal.

Keywords

Morocco, Independent Press, Moroccan Spring, 20 February Movement, Democratization, Red Lines, Liberalization of Speech

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Cover Page Footnote

Footnotes: Hamza Tayebi is a Moroccan Ph.D. researcher in Cultural Studies and a part-time professor of English at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Fez-Morocco. He is also an Executive Board Member in Takamul Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies and Research, Marrakech, Morocco. He is currently working on Religion, Politics, and Print Media in Contemporary Morocco. Email him at: tayebi_hamza@hotmail.fr Hudud is an Arabic word and it was used by the Moroccan well-known sociologist Fatima Mernissi in her book *Dreams of Trespass* and it means limits.

Acknowledgments: Grateful thanks are due to Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane-Morocco, for having provided me with the opportunity to present this article and bring it to discussion in *The Arab Spring and Media: The Road Ahead* Conference on June 12, 2014. I am very grateful to The University of Iowa for having accepted this article to be presented at the Arab Spring in a Global Context Conference in May, 2015. Mr. Edward Miner and Mr. Ahmed E. Souaiaia have always shown willingness to support and I thank them for their consideration to publish this article. Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge my great debt to one of my immediate friends, Lisa Manning Nishimuta, who has never shown uneasiness while paving the way to my success. I thank her for her proofreading and her useful feedback.

The Independent Press after the “Moroccan Spring”

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Abstract: The wave of Arab Spring that started in Tunisia and Egypt arrived to Morocco in 2011 paving the way to unprecedented organized mass-protests all over the country. Among the demands raised by the 20 February Movement protesters was the demand for free and independent media outlets, especially the press. King Mohammed VI, the Commander of the Faithful and the highest authority in Morocco, promised in a televised speech on March 9th to introduce "radical" and "genuine" constitutional reforms that would democratize the country. In fact, King Mohammed VI has so far succeeded in calming down and co-opting the demonstrations, but journalists and political activists still get fined if they trespass the *Hudud*². In my short article, I will briefly contextualize the Moroccan independent press and discuss its status after the "Moroccan Spring" with an attempt to show, through cases of imprisoned journalists, the contradictions associated with the liberalization of speech in Morocco. One of the main arguments of my article is that the democratization of the press could never be achieved as long as the public discourse that brings monarchical powers and actions into question is illegal.

Key Words: Morocco, Independent Press, Moroccan Spring, 20 February Movement, Democratization, Red Lines, Liberalization of Speech

The year of 2011, or more precisely the year of the Arab Spring, could be described as the tumultuous period in the modern history of the MENA region as it witnessed unprecedented and unexpected revolutionary protests that toppled many dictatorial and autocratic regimes like the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Hussni Mubarak regime in Egypt. Television, cell phones, and internet-based social media did play a key role in spreading the mass-protests and in mobilizing new movements of social resistance in many countries, including Morocco.

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²*Hudud* is an Arabic word and it was used by the Moroccan well-known sociologist Fatima Mernissi in her book *Dreams of Trespass* and it means *limits*.

In Morocco, the 20 February Movement³, being driven by uprisings and revolutions in other North African countries, not only protested against corruption, the absence of transparent elections, the high centralization of powers in the hand of the King, and the huge gap between the rich and the poor, but it also raised slogans calling for free and independent media outlets, especially the press, such as “Don’t touch the liberty of press and opinion”. Indeed, since Mohammed VI’s succession to the throne, Morocco has neither been officially described as a dictatorship nor as a democracy, but it has been claimed that the country is adopting the gradual shift towards democracy. While it is true that Morocco has already started the process of democratization, the actual problem is that almost all discussions or studies on democratization seldom give space to mass media. Rather, they routinely cover topics related to constitutional reforms and political parties. No one can deny the importance of the free independent press which is, as Azzedine Layachi notes in his *State, Society, and Democracy in Morocco: The Limits of Associative Life*, “an absolute necessity for a democratic environment in which an effective civil society can exist.”⁴ Milton, Locke, Madison, John Stuart Mill, and many other Classical liberal theorists strongly argue that free and independent media outlets can play a crucial and critical role in the democratization process. Edmund Burke’s concept of the ‘fourth estate’ has traditionally been regarded as one of the most efficient mechanisms of checks and balances. Indeed, not only does the independent press serve as a medium for civic associations to express their demands and objections, but it also serves as a tool in which to publicly question and evaluate the office holders and analyze their accountability.

It is a universally acknowledged truth that liberalizing the press and mass media in general is the key to any shift to democracy. However, analyzing the liberalization of the press in Morocco, as Driss Maghraoui argues, is very complex because all the reforms that have taken place are contradictory. He argues here that the reforms do not follow a democratic transition paradigm and, thus, seek change while at the same time continue to preserve continuity.⁵ It is also true that since the 1990s, and with the arrival of King Mohammed VI in 1999, more space has been open for debates in media. The independent press, in spite of the censorship and self-censorship phenomena, has recently experienced a slight broadening of its range of action. Nevertheless, even with the limited democratization of the press, journalists are only allowed to

³On February 20, 2011 this social movement started taking to the streets on a weekly basis asking for genuine and radical socio-economic and constitutional reforms in Morocco. The movement relied on the support of various organizations, unions, political parties and associations of different political colors (leftist, Islamist, Amazigh, student, and non-partisan people).

⁴Azzedine Layachi, *State, Society, and Democracy in Morocco: The Limits of Associative Life* (Georgetown: Georgetown University press, 1998), p. 68.

⁵Driss Maghraoui, “Introduction: Interpreting Reform in Morocco,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 12, N. 2 (July 2009), p. 144.

evaluate “and criticize state actions, the political leaders' behavior (except the King and the royal family in general), as well as to analyze social, economic, and cultural issues.”⁶ Driss Maghraoui argues in this regard that

Reforms have contributed to the enlargement of the space of political participation and provided better conditions for human rights, but they do not necessarily guarantee the rights of citizens to freely express their views. In Morocco, these rights stop when they reach [...] what is popularly known as the 'lignes rouges' or red lines. So the discourse about liberalization might be useful but the process is regularly faced by setbacks associated with the practice of fines against newspapers and occasional imprisonment of journalists.⁷

Following Maghraoui's statement, reforms in Morocco have improved the conditions of human rights without broadening enough the space of freedom of expression; that is, journalists are still unable to freely shed light on sensitive issues, or on what is referred to as the red lines. If these red lines are transgressed, newspapers are shut down and journalists are fined. In fact, the setbacks in Morocco's shift to liberalization and freedom that Driss Maghraoui talks about were noticed when interdictions and repressive measures started approximately one year after Mohammed VI's succession to the throne. After his promise of tolerance and his emphasis on the phrase “the rule of law”, King Mohammed VI then “punctuated the subsequent debate in 2001 by stating that “journalists are not angels either” and that “Moroccan culture will triumph over imported models of free expression and opinion.”⁸ Andrew R. Smith and Fadoua Loudiy say here that “one of the first and most notable interdictions under Mohammed VI was the censorship of *Le Journal* when it attempted to publish a photograph of and interview with Mohammed Abdelaziz, the leader of the Polisario Front, which is seeking independence for Western Sahara.”⁹ Reporters Without Borders also “indicated that in 2001 the managing editor of *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* was sentenced to three months in jail and ordered to pay a fine of \$200,000 for investigating

⁶Hamza Tayebi, “Print Journalism in Morocco: from the Pre-colonial Period to the Present Day,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, N. 6 (July 2013), p. 504.

⁷Driss Maghraoui, “Introduction: Interpreting Reform in Morocco,” p. 145.

⁸Andrew R. Smith and Fadoua Loudiy, “Testing the Red Lines: On the Liberalization of Speech in Morocco,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 27, (2005), p. 1083.

⁹Andrew R. Smith and Fadoua Loudiy, “Testing the Red Lines: On the Liberalization of Speech in Morocco,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 27, (2005), p. 1083.

allegations that the foreign minister misused public funds while serving as ambassador to the United States.”¹⁰ In fact, the political regime in Morocco seemed ready to reconcile with freedom of expression and with independence of media outlets when the opposition and socialist led government was elected to power in 1997. The new government, as Zaid Bouziame mentions in his “Moroccan Media in a Democratic Transition”, did lead a campaign with the aim to formulate a new press law that promised to enhance press freedom, but “since Mohammed VI’s accession to the throne in 1999, and following the reform of the press code in 2002, there was hope that radical reforms of Moroccan press laws would take place, but such aspirations have not been fully realized.”¹¹

Partisan newspapers do give a clear image about the lack of political perspective political parties suffer from in contemporary Morocco. Historically, exactly after independence from the French colonialism in 1956, the print press was mostly owned by political parties which were very critical and oppositional of the monarchy.¹² Opposition leaders resorted to newspapers as the only weapons through which they articulated their challenges against the regime. Because of the regime’s tactics to coopt political parties of the opposition, especially the inclusion of the left-wing Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) in 1998 and of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) in 2011, all political parties are now, according to Mohamed Daadaoui, unable, if not impotent, to mobilize society; accordingly, this “sets the monarchy above any political contests.”¹³ It is worth noting that the power political parties have lost is owing to the series of unexplainable splits that are, according to Mohammad Al-Tuzi, three kinds: splits arising from divisions, splits arising from separatist motivations, and arranged splits.¹⁴ Moroccans no more find trustworthiness in political parties in general, and in partisan papers in particular, and it is the independent press that has immeasurably grown in readership in Morocco. This is very clear today in Morocco seeing that the majority of people shun politics and political parties, let alone partisan newspapers. Following K. Kausch, many Moroccans are now very disappointed to see how former opposition parties have been all coopted by the political regime in the country.¹⁵ What is very astonishingly paradoxical is that “even the most prominent political figures in Morocco do not buy the

¹⁰ Zaid Bouzine, “Moroccan Media In A Democratic Transition,” *Conference Papers: International Communication Association*, (2009), p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² See Ahmed Ben Ashour’s *Mass Media in Morocco*, an unpublished Master’s thesis in the Institut Supérieur de Journalism defended in 1992, Rabat, Morocco.

¹³ Mohamed Daadaoui, “Rituals of Power and Political Parties in Morocco: Limited Elections as Positional Strategies,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, (2010), p. 196.

¹⁴ Mohammad al-Tuzi, “Reformers: Between Unity and Schism,” translated by Mohammed Bin Sheikh, *Wijhat Nazar*, Issue 2, (1999), pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Kristina Kausch, “Elections 2007: The Most Transparent Status Quo in Moroccan History,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (March 2008), p. 82.

newspapers of the political parties to which they belong.”¹⁶ Unlike independent newspapers, partisan ones are dependent on the financial assistantship from the government, and “this makes them state-regulated and with censorship hanging over them as the Sword of Damocles.”¹⁷ This censorship on the public sphere hampers any political party from discussing freely political issues and societal ills. In this regard, Daadaoui strongly contends that

The hegemony of the regime over the public sphere hinders the political parties’ ability to represent society and challenge the regime in a meaningful way, especially in policy making. Despite their lack of mobilizational capabilities and ideological clarity, political parties still regularly take part in limited elections and register their presence at a national level. The puzzle is why they participate when they know the rules of the game are set in advance to prevent any one party from dominating the political system, a system in which the regime enjoys strong religious legitimacy.¹⁸

Naturally, political parties appeared to mobilize society and function freely in it in order to have an actual voice in any socio-cultural, economic, and political-making processes. Indeed, this would take place only if the Moroccan regime allowed these political parties to enjoy real legislative and executive authorities. In the absence of this, political parties, along with their newspapers of course, “will remain nothing but useless shells.”¹⁹ What is needed now in fact is the *demakhzenisation* of political parties in Morocco so that their newspapers in particular would be able to have a clear political perspective and, therefore, regain the trust of the population that has unfortunately been left with a big plume of disappointment and sadness lurking just beneath the surface. In the absence of a true independence of

¹⁶Hamza Tayebi, “Print Journalism in Morocco: from the Pre-colonial Period to the Present Day,” p. 503.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 503.

¹⁸Mohamed Daadaoui, “Rituals of Power and Political Parties in Morocco: Limited Elections as Positional Strategies,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, p. 207.

¹⁹Drisse Jandari, “The Political Party Experience in Morocco: Obscurity and Policy Studies,” Case Studies of Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, Qatar, (March 2012), p. 21. See the article online on <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/get/b723ee20-2e1a-499e-b3ec-e1fc85809bb3.pdf>. Accessed on May 24, 2015.

political parties that are intended to mobilize citizens, it is more likely that the radical religious and ethnic groups will find it quite easy, especially with their ability to invest huge sums of money on mobilization, to fill the void. What is crystal clear now is that neither the state nor oppositional civil society activists wish to see this likely dramatic scenario occurring.

The Human Rights Watch's 2011 report concludes that the Media outlets in Morocco, both print and online ones, criticize and investigate the government and its officials, but they still face harassment when they trespass certain lines which include criticism of the royal family in general, Islam, or Morocco's claim on Western Sahara.²⁰ What is very contradictory here is that the new Moroccan constitution, which was held on July 1, 2011 as a response to the periodic protests of 20 February Movement, guarantees freedom of expression, but the press law prohibits any criticism of the monarchy or any member of the royal family, Islam, and of the state's position on status of the Western Sahara. This sort of contradictions makes the political landscape in Morocco very contradictory and characterized by a culture of passivity and followership that 20 February Movement protesters boldly revolted against. In this legal context, it is very difficult to envisage genuine democratization taking place in the country as long as the new constitution guarantees freedom of expression and the four board members of the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication are still monitoring content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. Agatha Koprowski clearly concludes that "while the Constitution and other major laws officially support free speech and a free press, the system is easily manipulated so that its actual exercise becomes practically impossible."²¹

The question that is worth asking now in this regard is whether or not freedom of expression has been enlarged for independent journalists after the 'Moroccan Spring'. The cases of imprisonment of journalists along with the international non-governmental organizations' reports on the press freedom in Morocco confirm that the status of the Moroccan independent press is unfortunately worse than it used to be during the two last years of King Hassan II's reign. In fact, there are a multiplicity of cases and remarks through which this stance could be defended.

First, many observers of the constitutional reforms that the Moroccan regime introduced in 2011 to calm down the protests concluded that this reform was not convincing due to the fact that Rachid Nini, the editor-in-chief of the first daily Moroccan newspaper in terms of circulation, *Al Massae*, was

²⁰The Human Rights Watch's 2011 report, p. 87.

²¹Agatha Koprowski, "Restrictions on the Press under King Mohammed VI and Morocco's Obligations under International and Domestic Laws on Freedom of Expression," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, (2011), p. 31.

arrested in April 28th, 2011 after the publication of several articles criticizing the Moroccan security services' abuses in the context of countering terrorism, including prison sentences handed down after unfair trials against Islamists.²² Rachid Nini called also for increased political freedom and wrote several articles about corruption among government officials as well as about the involvement in corruption of weighty people close to the King. Here, the determination to continue delimiting public discourse clearly means, according to Moshe Gershovich, that the "attentiveness of the King to the public sentiment for change does not seem to have extended towards greater toleration of the media's freedom to criticize sensitive issues."²³ In fact, many Moroccan independent newspapers like *Al Massae*, *Akhbar Al Yawm*, and *Al Ayyam*, to name but a few, attempt to sporadically transcend taboos and adopt an editorial line which is at least totally different for that of partisan newspapers whose chief editors and staff members are described now as "the Ultra-royalists"²⁴ of the country (more royalist than the King). In other words, the strength of independent newspapers' appeal to the reader does not solely lie, according to Aziz Douai, "in providing an alternative to the traditional partisan press, but actually lies in them assuming the role of a vibrant political opposition that the country currently lacks."²⁵

Many other Moroccan journalists, like Mohammed Sokrat and Mustapha El Hassnaoui, have been imprisoned and badly treated in prison according to Amnesty International and many other international organizations. Sokrate, a prominent blogger, was arrested by security forces while leaving an Internet café in Marrakech. In June 2012, a local court sentenced him to two years in prison on charges of drug possession and trafficking, according to news reports; on the other hand, Mustapha El Hassnaoui was charged with terrorism on July 11, 2013 as he had had interviews with Jihadi groups in Syria.²⁶ In

²²For more information on the case of Rachid Nini, see the 2012 report of Freedom House that is published on <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/morocco#.VPuX09KG9i0>. Accessed on March 8, 2015.

²³Moshe Gershovich, "The "New Press" and Free Speech under Mohammed VI," *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics and Civil Society under Mohammed VI*, by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 105.

²⁴The **Ultra-royalists** (*Ultraroyalistes* in French, also called as **Ultras**) were a French political group active from 1815 to 1830 under the Bourbon Restoration. The Legitimists, another of the main right-wing families identified in René Rémond's classic opus *Les Droites en France*, were disparagingly classified with the Ultras after the 1830 July Revolution by the victors, the Orleanists, who deposed the Bourbon dynasty for the more liberal king Louis-Philippe. Ultraroyalist also refers to "someone who is a very strong supporter of royalism."

²⁵Aziz Douai, "In Democracy's Shadow: The 'New' Independent Press and the Limits of Media Reform in Morocco," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 6.1, (2009), p. 21.

²⁶For more information on the case of Mustapha El Hassnaoui, see <http://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/18417/maroc-justice-condamne-journaliste-quatre>. Accessed on March 8, 2015.

fact, these two journalists' criticism of the Monarchy and its interpretations of Islam to gain legitimacy is widely believed to be the reason for their imprisonment. They also were both members of the February 20 Movement youth group, which had organized protests in 2011 calling for genuine reforms in Morocco and speaking against the centralization of power in the hand of the King. In his interesting *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism*, Anouar Boukhars clearly concludes that the interior ministry will "actively seize any issue of any newspaper it reasonably deems as constituting an offense or a threat to the monarchy, Islam, territorial integrity, or the public order".²⁷ Another interesting case is that of the famous Moroccan brave journalist Fatima Ifriqui who has been best-known for her support to the demands of the February 20 Movement and who was harassed by a private phone call on March 28, 2013 threatening her to put her children in danger. Fatima Ifriqui joined the rallies organized by the February 20 Movement on a regular basis and wrote many articles on *Akhbar Alyawm* and on *Lakome.com* severely criticizing the *Makhzen*²⁸ and putting monarchical powers and actions into question. In order to protect her children, Fatima Ifriqui wrote an article in Arabic on *Lakome.com* and other websites and in which she bitterly apologizes for her decision to stop writing.²⁹

What makes matters worse in the contemporary Moroccan media landscape is that journalists are sometimes fined and being accused of contriving stories against ministers in the government, and Youssef Jajilli, the editor in chief of the investigative weekly *Alaan Magazine*, is a very good case in point. Jajilli published on a June 2012 issue an article in which he reports that Abdelkader Amara, minister of Manufacture and Trade in the "Islamist" government, ordered champagne to his hotel room while on a taxpayer-funded trip outside Morocco. This was undoubtedly too embarrassing to the ministry especially because the Islamist law does forbid Muslims from drinking alcohol. Freedom House reported on the imprisonment of Jajilli pointing out that Amara accused the journalist of inventing the story despite the fact that the latter published later "the hotel bill showing the charges for alcoholic beverages under the official's name."³⁰ In his interview with Amnesty International, Youssef Jajilli, who won Morocco's prestigious National Press Award in 2011, says: "The current charges against me are politicized and are being used to try to silence my journalism and my magazine, I am not a criminal. I am a journalist who has done nothing but fulfill my ultimate duty

²⁷ Anouar Boukhars, *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 23.

²⁸The *Makhzen* was consolidated at the 17th century, and was initially used to collect taxes and to wage wars before becoming a synonym of the Moroccan bureaucratic and security apparatus.

²⁹See Fatima Ifriqui's last article on <http://pnnpress.com/?p=6053>. Accessed on February 22, 2015.

³⁰See <https://freedomhouse.org/article/moroccan-government-charges-editor-criminal-defamation#.VVKShNViko>. Accessed on May 12, 2015.

which is to serve as a watchdog on the government and expose corruption, truth.”³¹ Youssef Jajilli was accused according to Article 52 of the Moroccan Press Law that clearly states that journalists can face up to one year in jail and fines of up to 100,000 dirhams (US\$11,955) if convicted on defamation charges. Indeed, Jajilli was accused because he had published an article reporting on a Moroccan minister’s order of Champagne in a hotel room abroad, and this violation of freedom of speech clearly gives an idea of what may have happened to Jajilli if he had reported on the King or on any other member of the royal circle.

Another topical case is that of Ali Anouzla, the editor-in-chief of the famous online newspaper *Lakome*, and who was arrested in April 2013 “after posting an article on the terrorist threat in Morocco which included a link to an al-Qaida video criticizing the wealth of King Mohammed VI and calling for an uprising.”³² Ali Anouzla is charged with providing material support to, and apologizing for, terrorism, but colleague, and long-term campaigner for freedom of speech, Aboubakr Jamaï, says that “The state is using all its resources to put an independent journalist in prison on horrific charges in order to destroy his reputation and that of *Lakome*.” Anouzla, along with the staff of *Lakome*, are known for their criticism of the King and of corruption within the royal entourage. The Guardian newspaper says in this respect that “*Lakome* is at the forefront of an expansion of online news media in Morocco, regularly falling foul of the authorities for its investigative journalism, which has covered the King's botched handling of the release of a Spanish pedophile from prison, his lavish holidays to France, and corruption among his inner circle.”³³ What is very paradoxical is that Anouzla was arrested and charged with supporting terrorism despite the fact that he had clearly criticized the video of Al Qaeda, calling it propaganda. Indeed, all the international NGOs confirm that Anouzla was arrested because of his severe and open criticism of the monarchical actions and policies. He has recently been released on bail but continues to be investigated while *Lakome.com* remains censored by the authorities. Aboubakr Jamaï says in this context that the harassment of Anouzla is but an attempt to “destroy an emerging business model” which is difficult to be controlled as is the case with traditional print media. In addition to that, Moroccan authorities “have also recently obstructed the registration of Freedom Now, a new press freedom NGO created by Moroccan human rights defenders and journalists, including Ali Anouzla.”³⁴ There are many other serious cases like that of the Moroccan journalist Hamid El Mehdaoui, the

³¹ See <https://www.change.org/p/his-majesty-king-mohammad-vi-drop-the-criminal-defamation-charges-against-youssef-jajili-2>. Accessed on May 12, 2015.

³² See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/27/morocco-amnesty-crackdown-freedom-of-speech>.

³³ Ibid., Accessed on June 1, 2014.

³⁴ See <http://www.amnesty.ca/news/news-releases/morocco-stop-using-%E2%80%98terrorism%E2%80%99-as-a-pretext-to-imprison-journalists#.U3uzP86-q6g.twitter>. Accessed on June 1, 2014.

chief-editor of the online newspaper *badil*, who has been harassed and summoned to court regularly under the pretext that he published false information about the death of a 20 February Movement activist in prison.³⁵ *Badil* is known of its criticism of the violations of human rights as well as the king's actions and policies. Therefore, claiming that the status of the independent press has improved and that the reforms and promises initiated in 2011 represent a radical departure from the past would be utterly incorrect.

The cases of harassment against independent journalists oblige us to discuss the political landscape in Morocco because media systems in the Arab world, as William Rugh stresses, cannot be understood without taking into consideration the specific political conditions prevailing the country³⁶. Being the highest authority and the Commander of the Faithful in Morocco, the King does still reign and rule even after a referendum on constitutional reforms held in Morocco on July 1st, 2011 and that were reportedly approved by 98.49 % of voters, a notorious and predictable result in the Arab world. In spite of Mohammed VI's rhetorical calls for embracing democracy, the reforms he has so far initiated do not display any genuine or decent end to democratize the political system, a system which seriously lacks any meaningful framework of checks and balances. Unfortunately, the major powers, constitutionally speaking, are still in the hand of the King while the government still remains passive. Thierry Desrues argues here that the Moroccan Monarchy "has been afforded a monopoly over constituent power, supremacy over the representation of the nation, headship over the faithful and the role of protector of freedoms."³⁷ The Monarchy's clear monopoly in the Moroccan political landscape stands in the way of any genuine democratization in the country, hence making the King and any other member of the royal family not subject to criticism or critical discussion on independent media outlets. Islam has been discussed on media outlets, especially on print and online newspapers, and many scriptures related to polygamy and inheritance are regularly brought to the surface by leftist and Islamist newspapers and magazines like *Al Ahdath Al Maghribya*, *Assabil*, *Tel Quel* and many others. However, the official interpretations of Islam are still taboos that independent journalists rarely cross due to the fact that Islam, as Mohamed Daadaoui points out, is "the supreme reference for a hierarchy of legitimation that has enabled *makhzen* to extend its hegemony over civil society and the political system in general."³⁸ Therefore, questioning the official interpretations of

³⁵For more information about the case of Hamid El Mehdaoui, see the recent report of Freedom Now NGO, p. 38. See the report online on <http://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2015/02/11/rapport/rapport.pdf>. Accessed on March 8, 2015.

³⁶William A. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (USA: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. X.

³⁷Thierry Desrues, "Mobilizations in a Hybrid Regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan Regime," *Current Sociology Monograph*, Vol. 61, N. 4 (2013), p. 414.

³⁸Mohamed Daadaoui, *Moroccan Monarchy and the Islamist Challenge: Maintaining Makhzen Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 51.

Islam, one of the mechanisms of regime survival in Morocco, is still prohibited. Journalists cannot question the state's legitimacy in relation to Islam especially because the Moroccan press, as Aouar Boukhars stresses, is "still regulated by the main provisions of a Royal Dahir³⁹, issued on 21 November 1958" and "which was slightly amended in 1973 and 2002, but the changes have done nothing to reduce the vulnerability of the press to intentionally vague admonitions and ambiguous statutes."⁴⁰ While the Moroccan media landscape is much better than in its neighboring countries, the incidents of harassment against independent journalists demonstrate its failure and lack of strategy in achieving a truly independent media.

Another argument that I would attempt to hastily highlight here is that lack of freedom of expression might have been the reason behind the going tabloid attitude the majority of independent broadsheets in Morocco have adopted. My MA. dissertation defended in June 2013 was meant to investigate the trend towards tabloidization in *Assabah* and *Al- Ahdath Al- Maghribya*, two Moroccan independent newspapers. The conclusion reached after a content analysis on the aforementioned newspapers is that Moroccan broadsheets are massively adopting the features of yellow journalism or the features of tabloids. Here, the independent newspapers' shift towards tabloidization⁴¹ is, in the first place, unethical because it erodes the conventional journalistic standards, and then ideological as it disengages people from the real social, political, economic, and cultural matters of society. Hence, the argument I am trying to problematize here is that the absence of freedom of expression in Morocco leaves newspapers' chief-editors with no possibility to freely discuss politics in depth or to mushroom all information. To sell well, independent broadsheets have resorted to tabloidization, unethically superseding hard news with soft news.

In the light of what has been pointed out, it would be safe to assume that Morocco has started the process of democratization, but the absence of freedom of expression, especially when it comes to the independent press, puts this process at stake and the reforms introduced thus far have been impugned. The argument I have been attempting to defend is that the democratization of

³⁹*Dahir* means in English a decree-law. In Moroccan politics, a *Dahir* means a decree by the King of Morocco.

⁴⁰ Anouar Boukhars, *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism*, p. 23.

⁴¹**Tabloidization** could be briefly defined as a contemporary shift of focus in journalism away from hard news and serious factual information and toward soft news and entertainment. In other terms, it first means an increase of less newsworthy elements in the news; second, it means that popular and tabloid elements of secondary importance in the news are consciously or unconsciously placed in the foreground and the news content increasingly deviates from its real source. Third, process of tabloidization of the news means less coverage of international stories, little attention to politics and the economy but more to human interest and entertainment news stories, sport, scandal, people's private lives.

the press could never be achieved as long as the public discourse that brings monarchical powers and actions into question is still illegal. What should be done now is the implementation of serious and effective measures to fight the country's most precarious social issue, illiteracy, to enable Moroccans to understand and interact with the various discourses of media outlets. Nothing could actually justify the state's regular imprisonment and financial penalties against journalists while the rate of illiteracy is still very high and a significant portion of Moroccans are too poor to afford the prices of newspapers, magazines, and the monthly Internet bills. Along with that, the Moroccan regime should take into account the post-Arab Spring people's dreams and aspirations, and it is, therefore, expected to promote freedom of expression by establishing a genuine democratic environment with institutions able to function within a meaningful framework of checks and balances. As long as these things are not still prioritized by the Moroccan political system, Mohammed VI's promise to support a free press will always be regarded as an empty rhetoric.

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Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are due to Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane-Morocco, for having provided me with the opportunity to present this article and bring it to discussion in The Arab Spring and Media: The Road Ahead Conference on June 12, 2014. I am very grateful to The University of Iowa for having accepted this article to be presented at the Arab Spring in a Global Context Conference in May, 2015. Mr. Edward Miner and Mr. Ahmed E. Souaiaia have always shown willingness to support and I thank them for their consideration to publish this article. Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge my great debt to one of my immediate friends, Lisa Manning Nishimuta, who has never shown uneasiness while paving the way to my success. I thank her for her proofreading and her useful feedback.