

Morocco

Internet access in Morocco is, for the most part, open and unrestricted. ONI testing revealed that Morocco filters only a small number of Web sites, mainly pro-Western Sahara independence sites. A small number of Weblog servers and anonymizers were also found to be blocked. The filtration regime is not comprehensive—similar content can be found on other Web sites that are not blocked.



Background

Morocco faces two major issues that inform its actions regarding the press and human rights in general: the status of Western Sahara and terrorism. As to the first issue, Morocco has vied with the Polisario Front for control of Western Sahara ever since Spain pulled out of the region in 1976.¹ Morocco asserts a historical claim on the region,² while the Polisario Front asserts the right of self-determination.³ After decades of fighting, both sides agreed to a UN-sponsored ceasefire in 1991 that required an eventual referendum on independence in the region.⁴ As of yet, this referendum has not been held.⁵ Despite the cease fire, reports of overzealous suppression of

peaceful resistance to Moroccan rule persist.⁶ Journalism on the subject has been restricted as well. In February 2006 a journalist from and the managing editor of *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* were fined 3.1 million dirhams (USD370,668) for questioning the objectivity of a study run by the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center on the Polisario Front.⁷ In October 2006 Morocco barred foreign journalists covering human rights issues from entering Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara,⁸ and continued its crackdown on media coverage of the conflict by arresting and expelling a Swedish photographer found taking pictures of a pro-Polisario demonstration in Western Sahara in February 2007.⁹

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social	●				
Conflict/security			●		
Internet tools			●		
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency	●				
Consistency			●		

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

As to the second issue, terrorism, Casablanca was the site of a major terrorist attack in May 2003 when suicide bombers detonated five bombs targeting a Jewish community center, a Spanish restaurant and social club, a hotel, and the Belgian consulate.¹⁰ According to Human Rights Watch, “several hundred” suspects remain detained in connection with the incident and face “mistreatment, and sometimes torture, while under interrogation, and then convict[ion] in unfair trials.”¹¹ An antiterrorism law passed soon after the attacks placed further restrictions on the press.¹²

Internet in Morocco

The Internet was first introduced in Morocco in 1995,¹³ and the country now has one of the highest degrees of connectivity in Africa. Maroc Télécom is the largest Internet service provider (ISP) in Morocco, with an estimated market share in June 2006 in excess of 95 percent.¹⁴ The majority of the remaining customers are with Maroc Connect, which provides an ADSL service through wholesale access agreements with Maroc Télécom.¹⁵ Maroc Télécom offers wholesale services to other ISPs, following the Reference Access Offer approved by Morocco’s

telecom regulatory body, the National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (ANRT), in October 2006.¹⁶ In 2005 the total number of Internet users in Morocco was 4.6 million, up from 100,000 in 2000.¹⁷ This constitutes approximately 15.1 percent of the country’s population.¹⁸ Penetration remains low in absolute terms as a result of cost, the country’s low literacy rate, and a lack of infrastructure in rural areas. The mushrooming number of cybercafés, however, has expanded access from the capital city of Casablanca to Morocco’s smaller cities and villages. As of mid-2006, ANRT had granted over 10,000 licenses to ISPs and cybercafés.¹⁹ Internet service is also becoming faster and more reliable; ADSL service was launched in Morocco in 2003 and has attracted an increasing number of subscribers. The ADSL market grew by nearly 300 percent in 2005, and the number of subscribers topped 300,000 in mid-2006.²⁰ Morocco offers the cheapest DSL access in Africa; a monthly broadband connection starts at USD17 per month.²¹

The growing Moroccan blogosphere now includes over 10,000 blogs, mostly in French. As a result of the more widespread availability of the Internet, a Moroccan company recently launched

the country's first Arabic-language blog platform.²² Though largely free of filtration, posters generally avoid "red line" topics such as Western Sahara, defamation of royal authority, and defamation of Islam.²³

In the last few years, the Moroccan government has reportedly begun to block access to Web sites run by fundamentalist Islamic groups and Web sites that advocate for the independence of Western Sahara.²⁴ This filtering regime appears to be less than comprehensive, however, as many related sites go unblocked. Furthermore, groups and individuals who are unable to express their views in the traditional media have increasingly turned to the Internet to voice their opinions.²⁵ However, there is growing religious pressure to block explicit material such as pornography.²⁶

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Moroccan government held a monopoly on the country's telecommunications sector until a privatization initiative that began in 1997.²⁷ The ANRT was founded in 1998 and has encouraged private companies to offer competitively priced services, including ISPs and cybercafés.²⁸ The ANRT grants licenses to companies that wish to run ISPs, but individuals who want to obtain an Internet account do not need to obtain approval.²⁹ The government does not yet appear to have taken action against ISPs for account holders' activities or to monitor sites accessed by account holders or customers of cybercafés.³⁰

However, as mentioned earlier, Morocco is a consistent censor of the independent media, frequently fining newspapers and arresting journalists who report on human rights, politics, or Islam.³¹ Current laws criminalize criticizing the monarchy or Morocco's claim to Western Sahara.³² The antiterrorism bill that was passed following suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003 grants the government sweeping legal power to arrest journalists or to filter Web sites that are deemed to "disrupt public order by intim-

idation, force, violence, fear or terror."³³ In recent years, the Moroccan government appears to be growing increasingly proactive about shutting down newspapers and imprisoning reporters; in January 2007, a newsweekly was ordered shut down for two months after publishing jokes about Islam and a reporter and editor were given three-year suspended prison sentences.³⁴

Restrictions on freedom of expression reportedly have been extended to the Internet in recent years. According to Reporters Without Borders, in November 2005 the Moroccan government began blocking access to several major Web sites that support independence for the Western Sahara, a decision that was made either by the country's communications ministry or its interior ministry.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, Morocco reportedly cut off access to www.anonymizer.com, a Web site that allows Internet users to access banned sites from within the country. It has also been reported that the Web sites of Islamic fundamentalist organizations have been blocked, particularly those run by a fundamentalist group called the Justice and Charity Organization.³⁶

ONI testing results

ONI carried out testing of Moroccan Internet service on the principal Internet provider, Maroc Telecom, and a smaller ISP, MTDS. The results of the testing found blocking of a small number of sites. Blocking was found primarily on sites promoting the independence of Western Sahara, such as www.saadasahara.com and www.sahara-occidental.com, as well as the Web sites for the Union of Sahrawi Journalists and Writers (www.upes.org), the Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared (www.afapredesa.org), and the General Trade Union of the Western Sahara Petition (www.umdraiga.com/eucoco2004/documentosytalleres/tallersindical.htm). Two blog hosting sites, www.haloscan.com and www.livejournal.com, were blocked as well. Finally, ONI also found that two anonymizer

Web sites, www.anonymizer.com and www.multi-proxy.org, were blocked.

However, a number of sites reported blocked in the past were found to be accessible. These include www.wsahara.net and www.arso.org, both pro-Western Sahara independence sites, as well as www.spsrasd.info, the Saharan press service's site, and www.aljamaa.info, Justice and Charity's site (though the title of the site is Justice and Spirituality).

Conclusion

Morocco's Internet filtration regime is relatively light and focuses on Western Saharan independence, a few blog sites, and highly visible anonymizers. The issues Morocco faces in Western Sahara's push for independence, the specter of Islamist terrorism, and the protection of the royal family and Islam from defamation have led Morocco to crack down on free speech and the press, but have not yet led it to significantly censor the Internet. As Internet users can find blocked material on other accessible sites, it is clear that Morocco's filtration regime is not comprehensive. Relative to the region, Moroccan Internet access is fairly free.

NOTES

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