

PUBLIC

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Prisoner of conscience/health concern

MOROCCO

Ali Lmrabet (m), journalist

Prisoner of conscience Ali Lmrabet has been on hunger strike since 6 May in protest at his continued detention. On 26 May he was transferred from Sale Prison, near the capital Rabat, to Avicennes Hospital in Rabat. He is in a serious condition. Amnesty International is concerned that his life is at risk and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Ali Lmrabet is editor-in-chief of two Moroccan satirical weekly publications, *Demain Magazine* (Tomorrow Magazine) and its Arabic language counterpart, *Doumane*. He began his hunger strike in protest against the most recent court case to be brought against him by the Moroccan authorities. Since he was imprisoned on 21 May, he has said he is determined to remain on hunger strike until he is released.

Ali Lmrabet was sentenced by a court in Rabat, on 21 May to four years' imprisonment and a fine of 20,000 dirhams (approximately 2,000 US dollars) on charges of insulting King Mohamed VI, "undermining the monarchy" and "threatening the integrity of the national territory". His two publications were also banned by the court. He was sentenced on the basis of several articles, cartoons and a photo-montage which had appeared in both *Demain Magazine* and *Doumane*. These included an article featuring extracts of an interview, already published in a Spanish newspaper, with a Moroccan republican activist and former political prisoner, who advocates the right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people in Western Sahara. They also included a cartoon commenting on the parliamentary approval of the budget for the royal household.

In an unusual move for a case involving violations of press laws, Ali Lmrabet was jailed immediately after sentencing, despite indicating that he would appeal against the verdict. The court invoked "special circumstances" to do this. Normally, a person sentenced in such a case would remain at liberty until a ruling had been made on the appeal. Amnesty International considers Ali Lmrabet to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for exercising his legitimate right to freedom of expression.

It is not the first time that Ali Lmrabet has faced criminal charges for violating press laws. On 21 November 2001, he was sentenced to four months' imprisonment and a fine of 30,000 Moroccan dirhams (approximately 3,000 US dollars) by the Court of First Instance in Rabat for "disseminating false information which undermines public order or is likely to undermine it". The charge related to an article published in *Demain Magazine* on information received by the newspaper that a decision had been taken at the highest level in Morocco to sell a royal palace to foreign investors wanting to turn it into a tourist complex. Ali Lmrabet is still appealing against this sentence, and had been allowed to remain at liberty until the court had ruled on his appeal.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Questioning the monarchy or Morocco's right to Western Sahara remain taboo subjects in the North African kingdom. Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco and the self-proclaimed government in exile, known as the Polisario Front, which calls for an independent state for the Sahrawi people in the territory. Morocco annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Arabic, French, English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the health of Ali Lmrabet, who has been on a hunger strike since 6 May in protest at his recent court case and imprisonment;
- calling for his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience, jailed solely for the legitimate and peaceful expression of his beliefs.

APPEALS TO:

Justice Minister

M. Mohamed BOUZOUBAA

Ministre de Justice

Ministère de la Justice

Place Mamounia

Rabat

Morocco

Telegram: Ministre de Justice, Rabat, Morocco

Fax: + 212 37 72 37 10/ 73 07 72/ 73 89 40

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

COPIES TO:

Minister of Human Rights

M. Mohamed AOUJAR

Ministre des Droits de l'Homme

Ministère des Droits de l'Homme

47 Avenue Ibn Sina

Agdal

Rabat

Morocco

Fax: + 212 37 67 19 67

and to diplomatic representatives of Morocco/Western Sahara accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 9 July 2003.