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Morocco/Western Sahara: Editor facing year in jail over 'official's champagne dinner' story

A Moroccan editor is facing imprisonment on charges of disseminating false information after he ran a story alleging that a senior government official spent public money on a champagne dinner, Amnesty International said.

If found guilty Youssef Jajili faces a possible one-year prison sentence after he published the article in Al-Aan magazine in June 2012 reporting that the minister of industry, trade and new technologies spent 10,000 Moroccan Dirhams (around 1,180 USD) of public money on a private dinner during an official trip to Burkina Faso.

"The charges against Jajili must be dropped immediately by the Court of First Instance in Ain Sebaa in Casablanca. If imprisoned on these charges Youssef Jajili would be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to free expression," said Amnesty International.

"This is a stark reminder that despite their promised reforms and pledged commitment to upholding freedom of expression, the Moroccan authorities continue to stifle criticism."

Jajili, who's being charged under Article 42 of the Press Code for disseminating 'false information', claims he published the information only after thorough investigative work, and that he made several attempts to interview the minister.

"Investigative journalism into how public money is spent is a legitimate activity and the authorities should not hide behind sweeping provisions of the Press Code to evade scrutiny."

Morocco's current Press Code criminalises peaceful expression when it is deemed to undermine the monarchy, the territorial integrity of Morocco or to denigrate Islam.

Breaches are punishable by a prison sentence – a direct contravention of Morocco's international legal obligations and the constitution, which guarantee freedom of expression and of the media.

The charges faced by Youssef Jajili are part of a broader pattern of harassment and intimidation of journalists.

Omar Brouksy, an AFP reporter was beaten by police officers in August 2012 for reporting on an opposition-led demonstration against a traditional ceremony of allegiance to the King.

In October 2012, the Ministry of Communication revoked his accreditation after he published an article reporting that "candidates close to the royal palace" were competing for parliamentary seats in legislative elections in Tangiers.

To date, no investigation into Brouksy's assault has taken place and without his accreditation, he cannot work as a journalist in his own country.

“More than 18 months after adopting a constitution that guarantees freedom of expression and of the media, the Moroccan authorities must do more to allow journalists to operate freely. They must urgently amend the Press Code to bring it in line with international law.”