

Monitoring National Reactions to Human Rights Watch Reports in Morocco

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Brief Analysis

The relationship between Human Rights Watch and Moroccan state institutions has been notably tense recently, likely due to HRW's assessments of the human rights situation in Morocco, which do not necessarily align with those of the government.

Over the years there have been ebbs and flows in the relationship between the Moroccan government and international human rights organizations. Since the early years of Morocco's independence, international civil society organizations have exerted considerable pressure on the government to recognize the full range of human rights. While Morocco has, in certain contexts, responded to these demands by making legal amendments and establishing official bodies with a human rights mandate, it has often rejected the views and demands of international NGOs. Notably, the late King Hassan II **remarked** (<https://www.cndh.ma/fr/textes-de-reference/discours-de-sa-majeste-le-roi-hassan-ii-lors-de-linstallation-du-conseil>), in the context of establishing the Advisory Council on Human Rights in 1990, "This is the mission assigned to you. You must purify the pure face of Morocco. In any case, Amnesty International and others come to exercise their control over us, as if we were still under a Protectorate."

In this context, Human Rights Watch stands out, having produced and released a series of publications on Morocco, including reports, memos, and open letters. Not all of its positions have been endorsed by the Moroccan government, and some have led to tensions between the two. An example is HRW's **latest annual report** (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/morocco-and-western-sahara>), released on January 24, which is the subject of this article and will be analyzed in terms of the Moroccan response.

Tensions between HRW and Moroccan Institutions

The relationship between Human Rights Watch and Moroccan state institutions has been notably tense recently, likely due to HRW's **assessments** (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/morocco-and-western-sahara%23~:text=Moroccan%250authorities%2520stepped%2520up%2520their,rights%2520defenders%2520to%2520unfair%2520trials.>) of the human rights situation in Morocco, which do not necessarily align with those of the government. As is evident from the **latest response** (<https://en.hespress.com/78727-inter-ministerial-delegation-for-human-rights-totally-rejects-hrw-allegation.html>) of the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for Human Rights (DIDH), Moroccan state institutions view HRW's approach to human rights as a radical approach supported by local human rights activists, claiming that "the organization persists in its hostile campaigns against our country and in adopting an approach to assessing the human rights situation in Morocco that deliberately transgresses the main methodological rules and standards recognized in the work of NGOs, namely impartiality, objectivity and professionalism" HRW, for its part, believes the human rights situation in Morocco needs fundamental reforms, such as ensuring and protecting freedom of expression for government opponents and human rights activists and legal recognition of individual freedoms and migrant and refugee rights.

As on previous occasions, the focus in the HRW annual report on evaluating and criticizing the human rights situation in Morocco led to several angry domestic reactions. These generally range from official stances—such as a statement from the DIDH that totally rejected the claims in HRW's 2023 report on Morocco—to unofficial positions expressed through academic, civil, and media activities supporting the government's political and human rights choices.

However, the level of engagement with this latest HRW report was less intense than the debate that ensued from the group's July 2022 report, **"They'll Get You No Matter What": Morocco's Playbook to Crush Dissent** (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/07/28/theyll-get-you-no-matter-what/moroccos-playbook-crush-dissent>), which sparked debates lasting several weeks. Various institutions responded to the report, including

the Moroccan Prime Minister's Office, its spokesperson, the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for Human Rights, journalists' unions, and civil society organizations such as the Moroccan Association for Victims' Rights (AMDV).

The timing may have fueled the discussion of the latest report, whose release coincided with two significant human rights events in Morocco. One was Morocco's election to the presidency of the UN Human Rights Council in early 2024. Some human rights activists see this as an ordinary event and not an indication of human rights progress in Morocco, as countries accused of extensive human rights abuses have held this position previously. Nevertheless, some official and unofficial bodies rejecting the report strongly emphasized this event as indicative of Morocco's human rights credentials, and that HRW's continued monitoring is evidence that it is "targeting" the government and its institutions.

Additionally, the report's release coincided with Morocco's celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which was set up in 2004 after a challenging political process to address serious human rights violations during the period that Moroccan human rights literature calls "the Years of Lead." While the government sees the achievements of the past two decades as progress in the transition to democracy and human rights, some local and international human rights entities view this period as one of regression in human rights.

These two topics—the Equity and Reconciliation Commission and Morocco's election to the presidency of the Human Rights Council—were prominent in discussions about the HRW evaluation, especially about its objectivity and its grounding in factual, on-the-ground information, as mentioned in the response of the Inter-Ministerial Delegation.

The report sparked controversy in at least three key areas:

1. Repeating Topics from Previous Reports: The Inter-Ministerial Delegation's statement and its supporters fault the HRW report for rehashing data from previous annual reports, which leads them to argue that the report lacks objectivity and credibility. A review of the report reveals that the topics critics are referring to are judicial rulings executed against activists in the Rif and Sahara regions, journalists, and human rights defenders; legal restrictions on sexual freedoms; restrictions on freedom of association; and issues of migration and asylum.

One reason for the repetition in the HRW report (and previous annual reports) may be the lack of new data on these topics or the lack thus far of a fair and final resolution to the issues discussed, which could be seen as justifying repetition to draw the attention of local and international human rights actors to them, or perhaps these actors themselves present the topics as significant and as a priority in human rights reform.

It is worth noting in this context that several human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, repeat human rights issues in reports. Likewise, the U.S. State Department country reports do this as well.

2. Freedom of Expression: The HRW [report \(https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/morocco-and-western-sahara\)](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/morocco-and-western-sahara) dedicates a section to freedom of expression, listing cases in which journalists, government opponents, and human rights activists were imprisoned. HRW calls these imprisonments "underhanded tactics" and an "ecosystem of repression" employed by Moroccan authorities against opponents and critics. These tactics include unfair trials, video and digital surveillance, targeting of relatives, and "harassment and smear campaigns in state-aligned media," according to the report.

Naturally, the Inter-Ministerial Delegation did not appreciate the report's use of terms such as "underhanded tactics," "ecosystem of repression," "retaliation" for criticism, and exploitation of legal texts to pursue and imprison citizens, and subsequently criticized the report as lacking in rights-based language and methodology.

3. The Sahara Issue: HRW reports, like those of other international organizations, tend to approach the human rights issue in the Sahara differently from the government. While the Moroccan monarch has called the Sahara issue "the lens through which Morocco looks at the world"—and therefore a fundamental determinant of its positions, policies, partnerships, and international relations—HRW sees the Sahara region as disputed territory under Moroccan control, and the report criticizes Morocco's policies in the Sahara provinces. This has led to numerous biting criticisms of the report, particularly concerning what critics see as its failure to address Polisario Front "transgressions" against human rights and international law.

In conclusion, understanding the current tension between the Moroccan government and HRW requires understanding the complex history between these two entities. Based on past experience, the relationship between the government and human rights organizations often follows a cyclical pattern characterized by logic of take and respond. Also, recent conflicts over specific human rights issues such as freedom of expression, might not find a path to a future resolution except through creating spaces for discussion and effective dialogue between both parties as it "relatively" happened in other causes like personal status laws, women's rights, and Amazigh rights. ❖

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