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Morocco/Western Sahara: Release blogger imprisoned for peacefully expressing his views

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of 29 year old blogger Mohamed Erraji sentenced yesterday, 8 September, to two years imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 dirhams (approximately 625 US dollars) by the Court of First Instance in Agadir, reportedly for “lack of respect due to the King”. Amnesty International believes that the conviction is a result of Mohamed Erraji’s article published on the independent Moroccan website *Hespress* on 3 September under the title “The King encourages the nation (to rely) on handouts”.

The organization considers Mohamed Erraji a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for peacefully expressing his views. To Amnesty International’s knowledge, Mohamed Erraji is the first blogger to be convicted in Morocco for peacefully expressing his views on the internet. Amnesty International is deeply concerned that Mohamed Erraji’s conviction might serve to deter other bloggers from using the internet to discuss issues freely.

The day after Mohamed Erraji’s article appeared on the *Hespress* website, he was summoned for questioning to the police station in Agadir. He was reportedly questioned by around ten law enforcement officers from 9am to 5pm. He was then released and instructed to return to the police station the following day to complete the investigation. According to the information received by Amnesty International, when he returned to the police station on 5 September he was kept in pre-arraignment detention (*garde à vue*) and transferred to the Inzegaine prison on the night of 7 September. His family members were not informed of his detention, in breach of article 67 of the Moroccan Criminal Procedure Code, which requires judicial police to notify families of detainees at the beginning of their detention.

Mohamed Erraji was brought in front of the Court of First Instance in Agadir on 8 September and convicted without the presence of a lawyer. While the judge inquired whether he had a lawyer, his family claims that the speed with which his trial occurred and the failure of the authorities to inform the family of his detention effectively prevented them from seeking legal counsel or the aid of human rights organisations. At the hearing, Mohamed Erraji’s admission of writing the article reportedly served as sufficient grounds for his conviction.

On his blog, which he describes as the space where he can freely express his thoughts and views, Mohamed Erraji largely comments on social and political events in Morocco.

Amnesty International also calls on the Moroccan authorities to act in conformity to article 9 of the Moroccan Constitution and to its obligations under article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by respecting freedom of expression and releasing Mohamed Erraji immediately and unconditionally.

In recent years, several people, including journalists, political activists and human rights defenders, have been prosecuted and in some cases sentenced to prison terms, after peacefully expressing criticisms of the monarchy, still considered to be a “taboo” subject in Morocco. Moroccan legislation contains a number of provisions in both the Penal Code and the Press Code that carry sentences of up to five years and heavy fines for any “offences” against the person of the King or his family or for “undermining the monarchy”. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Moroccan authorities to lift all impediments to freedom of expression.

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