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Morocco: Ali Lmrabet must be immediately released

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Moroccan journalist Ali Lmrabet, jailed solely for the legitimate and peaceful expression of his beliefs. Amnesty International is renewing its appeal for his release on the eve of a court hearing on Wednesday, at which he risks a further four months in jail being imposed on him.

"Ali Lmrabet should not have been imprisoned in the first place," said Amnesty International. "He is a prisoner of conscience and must therefore be immediately and unconditionally released."

Ali Lmrabet, editor-in-chief of two satirical independent newspapers, *Demain Magazine* and *Doumane*, is currently on hunger strike in protest at his continued detention. He has expressed his determination to remain on hunger strike until he is released. Ali Lmrabet previously undertook a 47-day hunger strike in May last year in protest at his court case and imprisonment and had to be admitted to hospital.

The Court of Appeal in Rabat, the Moroccan capital, will examine on Wednesday an appeal lodged by Ali Lmrabet's lawyer to revoke a four-month sentence he received on 21 November 2001. Lmrabet was convicted of "disseminating false information which undermines public order or is likely to undermine it" after publishing an article on a royal palace in *Demain Magazine* on 20 October 2001. In addition to the prison sentence, he was fined 30,000 Moroccan dirhams (approximately 3,000 US dollars).

The article was entitled "The royal palace of Skhirat reportedly 'for sale' " (*Le palais royal de Skhirat serait en vente*). The article said that the newspaper had received information that a decision had been taken at the highest level in Morocco to sell the royal palace to foreign investors wanting to turn it into a tourist complex.

Amnesty International urges the Moroccan authorities to either abolish or review all legislation which, in violation of international standards, stipulates prison sentences for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

Background:

Ali Lmrabet founded the French-language weekly *Demain Magazine* in early 2001. His previous, similarly named newspaper, *Demain*, was banned by the Moroccan authorities in December 2000 for "undermining

the stability of the state", following publication of an article alleging the implication of the political left in a 1972 coup attempt against the late King Hassan II. He is also a correspondent for the international press watchdog, *Reporters sans frontières* (Reporters without borders).

Ali Lmrabet is already serving a three-year prison sentence, handed down on appeal on 17 June 2003. He was convicted on charges of insulting King Mohamed VI, "undermining the monarchy" and "threatening the integrity of the national territory" on the basis of several articles, cartoons and a photo-montage which had appeared in his newspapers. These included an article featuring extracts of an interview, already published in a Spanish newspaper, with a former Moroccan political prisoner advocating the right to self-determination for Sahrawis in Western Sahara; and a cartoon commenting on the parliamentary approval of the budget for the royal household. He was also fined 20,000 dirhams (approximately 2,000 US dollars) and a ban was imposed on his newspapers.

The monarchy and the status of Western Sahara are taboo subjects for public discussion. Several people, including journalists and political activists, have been imprisoned in recent months after peacefully expressing views on these issues. Western Sahara is a disputed territory claimed by both Morocco, which annexed it in 1975, and the Polisario Front, which calls for an independent state there and has set up a self-proclaimed government-in-exile in refugee camps near Tindouf, southwestern Algeria.

Public Document

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