

## Chapter 2

# Moroccan Media in Democratic Transition

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A core assumption of much of the literature on media in developing countries is that a more independent press with greater freedom will make a positive contribution to political change. In Morocco, a democratic transition started in 1997, when the opposition socialist party came to power and led the government. The new government's mission was to enact political reforms that aimed at promoting human rights, civil liberties, an open and pluralist media, and at establishing the rule of law. This paper examines the interplay between media policy, media institutions, and the government. To evaluate the nature of the political role of media in democratic transitions requires close scrutiny of three major factors: the legal, the economic, and the political environments. One important outcome of this research is that it will help determine whether Morocco's democratic reforms are meaningful reforms, or just empty attempts to pacify domestic and international public opinion.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between media and democracy has been widely researched. Classical liberal theorists from Milton through Locke and Madison to John Stuart Mill have argued that free and independent media can play a critical role in the process of democratization. Edmund Burke's concept of the 'fourth estate' has traditionally been regarded

as one of the most efficient mechanisms of checks and balances. In the Arab world, this interplay among mass media, politics and society did not lead to political change. It is a common belief among communication scholars that Arab mass media were inefficient in promoting democratization in the Arab societies in which they operated (Rugh, 1987). Rather, mass media functioned as a support system for the authoritarian regimes. Arab

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regimes used mass media mostly for propaganda and entertainment purposes at the expense of other functions and services (Ayish, 2003). The effects of mass media on democracy, politics, and society were at best minimal.

Since the late 1990s, some Arab governments have taken steps towards the democratization of their political systems. In Morocco, a democratic transition started in 1997, when the opposition socialist party came to power and led the government. The new government's mission was to enact political reforms that aimed at promoting human rights, civil liberties, an open and a pluralist media, and at establishing the rule of law. The new government led a campaign to formulate a new press law that promised to enhance press freedom.

A core assumption of much of the literature on media in developing countries is that a more independent press with greater freedom will make a positive contribution to political change. According to the literature, the media performs one of three specific political roles in a given society: an agent of stability by helping preserve social and political order (developmental press), an agent of restraint by denouncing government corruption (social responsibility), and an agent of change by helping oust authoritarian regimes (revolutionary press) (Hatchen, 1993). One of the shortcomings of this conceptualization of the relationship between media and society is that it tends to focus on the relationship between media and political systems (authoritarian, libertarian, communist, etc.) and it tends to ignore the relationship among media policy, media economics, and issues of access to media contents.

This paper provides a historical analysis of the major developments in Moroccan media since the country's independence in 1956. To evaluate the nature of the political role of media in democratic transitions requires close scrutiny of three major factors: the legal, the economic, and the political environments.<sup>1</sup> The paper examines the media policy as enacted in the Press Code, the Audiovisual Communication Law, and the *Haut Autorité*

*de la Communication Audiovisuelle* HACA (High Commission for Audiovisual Communication), and it explores the potential for further policy reforms. The paper also provides a careful and detailed examination of the economic and political environments and addresses the degree of political control over the contents of news media and the government's tendency to use media policy to limit the ability of media to operate. Finally, the paper addresses the issues of access to media contents, and it argues that the potential of Moroccan media to have a positive impact on the democratic transition does not depend only on the existence of an independent and free media. The media are only efficient for democracy if all sectors of society, especially those which are most disadvantaged or marginalized, can access media content to gain information and make informed decisions that affect their lives. The paper will first provide a brief historical analysis of the major developments in Moroccan media. It includes print, broadcasting, and the Internet.

## **2. HISTORY OF MOROCCAN MEDIA**

### **2.1 Print Media**

Early newspapers were issued by foreign colonial rulers, namely French and Spanish. By 1911, there were 17 foreign publications and all served as instruments of colonialism. The root of Moroccan press lies in their reactions to these papers (Alami, 1985, p. 25). Moroccan nationalists used the print press to mobilize people against colonialism. By 1956, there were a dozen publications issued by Moroccan nationalists. Print press remained a tool in the struggle for liberation and independence. Under the imperative of security, the French colonial powers introduced a number of press laws to regulate the nationalist press and contain its influence. For instance, in the 1950s, as the struggle for independence intensified, all Arabic papers were banned (Jaidi, 1999).

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