

Moroccan journalist jailed over protests

RABAT, Morocco - A Moroccan court on Tuesday sentenced to three months in jail a journalist accused of having "invited" people to take part in banned protests in the restive north, his website said.



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Hamid El Mahdaoui was arrested on Thursday at the start of a banned demonstration in the northern city of Al-Hoceima, during which protesters clashed with police.

El Mahdaoui, who heads the Badil online news site, was found guilty of helping to organise "a non-authorized march" as well as having "invited" others to take part in the protest, the website said.

He was sentenced to three months in jail and fined 20,000 dirhams (1,800 euros), Badil said, adding that he could appeal the verdict.

The journalist, known for criticising authorities particularly in videos posted on YouTube, was already facing prosecution after two government ministers accused him of defamation.

Media watchdogs have denounced his arrest and accused Morocco of hindering the coverage of unrest in the Rif region, where Al-Hoceima is located, which has been shaken by protests for months.

The US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on Friday called for his release and urged authorities to drop all charges against Badil.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in a statement Saturday said the situation for Moroccan and foreign journalists covering events in northern Morocco "keeps on getting worse".

"By trying to prevent coverage of the Rif protests, the Moroccan authorities are gradually turning this region into a no-go zone for independent media," it said.

The Al-Hirak al-Shaabi protest movement was born last October after a fishmonger was crushed to death in a rubbish truck as he tried to retrieve swordfish confiscated for being caught out of season.

Calls for justice later snowballed into a wider social movement demanding jobs, development, and an end to corruption in the mainly Berber region.

Source: AFP.

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