

# The Moroccan ‘Independent’ Press: Issues of Independence and Political Opposition

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**Abstract:** The emergence of the ‘independent’ press in Morocco in the beginning of the 1990s and its considerable thrive throughout 25 years has instigated a lot of debate about the factors and actors behind its inception and the roles it has performed with respect to Moroccan society and politics. At the heart of this article are two fundamental issues: the meaning of press independence in Morocco and the sociopolitical functions which the Moroccan press has performed so far; namely, the assumption that it functioned as political opposition during a certain period in Moroccan post-modern history. The paper critically reviews the main arguments advanced in the literature about these two issues. It buttresses the review with important historical events and testimonies of prominent practitioners and researchers. The paper concludes that according to normative media autonomy, the so-called independent press in Morocco is far from being independent. It also concludes that while the press carried out primordial sociopolitical functions before 2011, post-Arab Spring era has witnessed a conspicuous dumping of these functions.

**Keywords:** Press, independent, socio-political, political opposition, taboos.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, the Moroccan press has been a dynamic institution which has impacted and been impacted by the overall socio-political spectrum of which it constitutes an important component. It has echoed the pulse of an ever-changing society and taken part in the debate about policies and current affairs. Through the functions of information and enlightenment, it has contributed to the gratification of the public’s right to know and increased Moroccans’ political connection and literacy. The Moroccan press has also been subjected to the unwavering will of an ambivalent, temperamental political establishment which has exclusively maintained the right to define journalistic appropriateness in terms of what and how to report. The interaction between the Moroccan press and the central authorities in Morocco has been imponderable between moments of confrontation and moments of peace, depending on historical circumstances and the general temperament of political economic power centres.

Unlike broadcast media, which, being under strict control of the state, have predominantly been univocal in their pro-establishment discourse, Moroccan print media have reflected and inserted a considerable diversity in affiliation, content, and style. They have also managed to balance people’s perception of social reality and national politics by producing an alternative narrative about events and current affairs other than the official one and campaigned for the development and modernization of Moroccan society and politics.

This article pithily accounts for the political-historical requisites underlying the emergence and quick thrive of the Moroccan ‘independent’ press, how it has superseded the partisan press after this latter became engrossed in narrow unsubstantiated partisan narratives, and how it became the principal actor in the Moroccan media landscape. It also raises the debate about the meaning of independence in the Moroccan press and whether the ‘independent’ press has played the role of political opposition in Morocco at a certain time in Moroccan post-modern history.

## II. FROM THE PARTISAN PHASE TO THE POST-PARTISAN PHASE

From a historical point of view, the press in Morocco can be divided in two primordial phases: the partisan phase and the post-partisan phase.

### A. *The Partisan Phase (1946<sup>1</sup>-1990s)*

The partisan phase accounts for daily newspapers and periodicals tributary to grassroots and established political parties - pro-government and oppositionist- which have multiplied throughout post-colonial and modern Morocco. The main titles were the Arabic daily *Alalam* (1946) and its Francophone counterpart *L'Opinion* representing Al Istiklal Party (Party of Independence PI), and *Al Itihad Al Ishtiraki* (1959) and its Francophone counterpart *Liberation* representing The Socialist Union of Popular Forces SUPF<sup>2</sup>. During the partisan phase, the press has performed different roles which can pithily be recalled in the following:

- It first prided itself for a militancy role during colonial period (1912-1956) by successfully manoeuvring to produce an anti-colonial narrative and galvanizing Moroccans against the French and Spanish settlers.
- After independence, the press, gradually developing into a national institution, played a political role by mediating the debate about the nature of the political system to be adopted after independence in terms of prerogatives and responsibilities of each of the components of the political elites including mainly the king and the growing political parties.
- It also strived for the institution of democratizing political practices like pluralism, elections, and participation of the citizenry in choosing their political leaders, which led to political contest and polarization between the monarchy and its partisan affiliates on the one hand, and the opposition mainly leftwing parties on the other hand.
- It managed to attract the middle-class social constituency by providing information and in-depth analyses of social and political issues, which gained it a growing readership and an important market circulation.

The political power contest between the monarchy and opposition parties would last until the end of the 1990s, with the demise of traditional political opposition in Morocco and, parallel to it, the demise of the partisan press. The alternation experience (1998-2002) put leftwing parties and their iconic leaders to the test of government from which they left without making significant change<sup>3</sup>. The most critical issues pertaining to social governance, institutionalization of politics, administration, education, health, employment, etc were left unresolved. The experience turned out to be a fatal embrace (Naji, 2006) which made leftists lose much of the credibility they had built throughout decades of opposition and militancy. During and after this period, the discourse of partisan papers also made a radical editorial paradigm shift in favour of the status quo by inscribing a justificatory, legitimist language which did not reflect the expectations and frustrations of Moroccans. Drawn in a blunt and normalizing discourse, the partisan press lost the appeal and vibrancy it used to have. As a result, Moroccan readership would turn its back to partisan newspapers and quickly identify with the new discourse of grassroots non-partisan newspapers whose inception in the 1990s was the most socio-politically important development in the history of Moroccan media. Today, out of 488 newspapers and magazines, only 15 (4%) are partisan<sup>4</sup>, the great majority (96%) are non-partisan.

### B. *The Post-partisan Phase*

The post-partisan phase started with the decline of genuine political opposition from the Moroccan political scene, especially after the disappointing alternation experience. The beginning of the 1990s also witnessed an important wave of deregulation and privatization of national economy and telecommunication and, with it, a considerable opening in politics and civil liberties. This environment would encourage the emergence of privately funded outlets without clear political or

<sup>1</sup> The inception of the first partisan newspaper "*Alalam*" representing the Istiqlal Party (Independence Party)

<sup>2</sup> Both parties and their respective outlets militated against French and Spanish colonization and against the monopoly of political power by the royal institution after independence.

<sup>3</sup> Between 1998 and 2002, El Youssoufi –a historical leftwing opposition figure- led the Alternation Government, which was arguably an ingenuous strategy pondered by Hassan II to co-opt and placate traditional opposition in order to make smooth transition to his son King Mohammed VI after his death. The government did not gratify Moroccan's expectations and left huge social dossiers unresolved.

<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Communication Report (July, 2016)

ideological affiliation, led by a generation of young journalists who were keen to modernize the profession and practice of journalism in Morocco. One of their major achievements was the diversification of newsstands by inserting a newsy content rather than a politicized one. A second realization was the conversion of middle-class readers who were fed up with partisan language of wood and eager for an alternative discourse with which they quickly identified. A third and most important realization was the establishment of what would be called the ‘independent’ press<sup>5</sup> as a new trend in Moroccan journalism which would contribute a great deal in the decentralization of public discourse and the depolarization of politics.

### III. THE DEBATE ABOUT PRESS INDEPENDENCE

It is crucial to evoke the debate which was launched, and is still stern up to date, about the meaning of press independence in Morocco. Whether the privatization juncture in the trajectory of the Moroccan press was a real automatic response on the part of Moroccan media organizations to the context of global liberalization and deregulation of information, or a state-funded project designed to serve ends other than what it entails is the core theme of debate.

The sceptical views insist that the so-called ‘independent’ press, from the outset, was by no means a project initiated by autonomous media organizations; it was a project sponsored by the monarchical institution. This argument is grounded in the fact that the late monarch was more than ever in need of a media discourse which was likely to deter the politico-ideological hegemony of opposition parties in the print media sphere (Naji, 2006). It was arguably launched by the Ministry of Interior and Information and its intelligence department in order to disturb and compete with the opposition parties’ outlets (Ibid.) whose critical discourse and potential to appeal to great sectors of middle-class readership were exponentially increasing. Among the state-sponsored papers, according to the sceptics, Naji mentions *Maroc Hebdo*, *L’Economiste*, *La Vie Economique*, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, *La Gazette du Maroc*, *Le Journal*, *Assaheefa*, and others. All these private titles allegedly received aids and subsidies from the state. It was reported by Jamai, for example, that *Le Journal* benefited from direct royal support for its financial sustainability, including providing it with a permanent print house (Lkmahri, 2012).

Observers bring evidence from the editorial choices of these papers and trace some discursive discrepancies which nurtured suspicion. They remind, for example, that the short life of *Le Journal* (1997-2000) was the outcome of the bra-de-fer with the El Youssoufi<sup>6</sup>-led government, especially after the weekly published a letter from F. Basri<sup>7</sup> accusing El Youssoufi and other SUPF militants of complicity in the 1972 military coup attempt against King Hassan II. Meanwhile, *Le Journal* and other ‘independent’ newspapers distanced from criticizing the institution of the palace and were keen on maintaining symbiosis with the person of the king.

The apologists of press independence, on the other hand, argue that the emergence of the ‘independent’ press was a manifestation of the spirit of diversity and opening which featured the beginning of the 1990s. For them, the deregulation of information and media in Morocco was the result of the expansion of civil freedoms, including freedom of the press, and a clear indication of Morocco’s commitment to the international values of liberalization and human rights. Their argument is founded on the high price which ‘independent’ journalists have paid for press freedom and independence. The imprisonment of many journalists, the confiscation of their publications, the hefty fines they paid, and the other forms of retribution and censorship which were impinged on them for broaching official taboos and trespassing heated territories (Benchemsi, 2011) are unequivocal instances which testify to the claim of genuine independence .

Normative theory of press independence, however, as described by McQuail (2000), Rozumilowicz (2002), and Harro-Loit, et al. (2012) underscores at least three levels of press independence: *ideological*, *financial*, and *professional*. An independent press is ideology-free; that is, it should not have inherent allegiances neither to the government nor to political parties. Also, it should have private financing, “independent media do not receive government subsidies” (Media

<sup>5</sup> Press independence is a very contentious theme in media scholarship and professional circles. There are at least 4 types of media independence: political, ideological, economic, and professional. The designation –‘independent’- is deliberately put between inverted comas throughout the paper because of the difficulty to vouch its genuine independence.

<sup>6</sup> An iconic opposition leader who led the government in the Alternation Government of 2008 after his party SUPF won elections in 1997.

<sup>7</sup> A leftwing opposition figure and companion of Elyoussoufi during the 1960s and 1970s. He was exiled in France during Hassan II’s reign (1961-1999). He returned from exile after Mohammed VI ascended the throne.

Sustainability Index, 2014). Further, an independent press should be able to cover key events and issues and exclude self-censorship (Ibid.).

In an interview with 2 directors of publication and 2 chief editors of the 4 most popular Moroccan ‘independent’ papers<sup>8</sup>, all interviewees concur that press independence in Morocco needs to be put between brackets. This means that we cannot categorize the Moroccan ‘independent’ press among any of the many normative categorizations (economic, political, ideological, professional, to name just a few) of press independence. An economically independent press does not take subsidies from the government and does not live on corporate funding. A politically independent press is not politically affiliated and takes a step back from political and polemic controversies among parties. An ideologically independent press shelves obsolete ideals and militant projections for more closeness to social reality. Finally, a professionally independent press takes an impartial third side in conflict situations and considers all angles of the story without bias or favouritism.

All interviewees agree that the Moroccan ‘independent’ press does not conform with most of these categories. It receives subsidies from the government on a regular basis. It overtly or covertly expresses political views endorsing or opposing this or that political faction. Ideology (moderate conservatism, leftism, liberalism...) can be dissected from the nuances of its discourse; some outlets endorse a liberal worldview while others a moderate conservative one.

Last but not least, despite the interviewees’ unanimous claim that their outlets focalize news more than opinion, this latter is very present and is very often embedded within the discursive elements and framing tools used to defend a cause or undermine another. In this respect, Bouachrine<sup>9</sup> rejoins: “The so-called independent press in Morocco may be independent from the government or from the state or the opposition, but it is by no means independent from the opinions of its owners or shareholders and stakeholders”.

However, all interviewees agree with Bouachrine’s argument that “we can call it the press of society because it is close to the concerns of the citizens while all the centres of power have their media outlets”. Still, being close to the concerns of the citizenry is often at odds with maintaining and promoting the interests of the owners, partners, or funders.

#### IV. THE ‘INDEPENDENT’ PRESS AS POLITICAL OPPOSITION

The Moroccan ‘independent’ press has considerably marked and been marked by the politics of transition in Morocco. The political opening and economic liberalization of the 1990s and their repercussions on the Moroccan society have helped the ‘independent’ press to modernize its structure and discourse and become the principal actor in the media market. Market preponderance and popular appeal made ‘Independent’ press institutions uphold fundamental social and political functions which they performed in their mediation between the authorities and the general populace.

The social function of the Moroccan ‘independent’ press has been inherent in its designation as ‘independent’; that is, not representing political institutions and political parties but representing the less represented factions of society as Moroccan editors and directors like to underscore. In this respect, non-partisan papers managed to mark their distinctive territoriality through social proximity which summarizes the following initiatives:

- Addressing people in their language by avoiding ambiguities and farfetched style.
- Sensitizing the public about social problems (illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, health...) and engaging in debate about them.
- Providing platforms for the general public to participate in discussions about politics and current affairs.
- Representing the marginalized sectors of society (rural citizens, the poor, the Amazigh, women...).
- Informing citizens about governmental policies.
- Exposing and criticizing governmental inefficacy and corruption, etc.

<sup>8</sup>The interview was conducted with *Almassae*’s chief editor, *Assabah*’s first secretary of edition, *Akhbar Alyaoum*’s director of publication, and *Tel Quel*’s director of publication in June, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Director of publication of *Akhbar Alyaoum*

These social roles gained ‘independent’ outlets unprecedented public appeal and encouraged journalists and editors to smoothly play a more important political role which was justified by peculiar circumstances in Moroccan society and politics. The beginning of the new millennium marked the demise of leftist politics after El Youssoufi left government in 2002. Moreover, the most serious social issues remained unresolved and even aggravated in the citizens’ perception by World Bank and other global organisms’ reports on Morocco describing its socioeconomic and human development indicators as lacklustre. Further, the monarch appointed a technocrat cabinet disregarding the 2002 elections and the parties which won the majority of seats in parliament. As a response to the absence of democratic political actors either in the government or the opposition, Moroccan citizens turned their back to politics and politicians; still, they remained avid for a journalistic discourse which would criticize the status quo, mediate public debate about social issues and current affairs, and advocate change.

Political stagnation was the outcome of the absence of a genuine opposition from Moroccan political arena. After leftists failed the experience of government (Monjib, 2012), the last voices of traditional opposition were muted (Desrués and Moyano, 2001) especially after the alternation government’s failure to figure out pending severe economic and social disparities, leaving behind a political vacuum which arouse public disappointment which quickly grew into unequivocal resentment. The cost was, consequently, heavy for traditional opposition parties. They lost their hard-won popularity and their credibility which they had nurtured with decades of militancy for democratic change, governance, social justice, and concrete human rights. The demise of the opposition in Morocco, by and large, made the political arena suffer unprecedented imbalance, stagnation, and normalization.

According to El Hachimi (2007), three new actors would break into the political scene and fill the void left by traditional opposition. The first actor was Islamism which would enter politics through the social gate (El Kadoussi, 2012) before it became a real political force which would reshuffle the political cards in Morocco from 2011 through 2016<sup>10</sup>. The second actor was an unprecedented mushroom of associations and swift expansion of the civil society, from a few hundred associations in the beginning of the new century to around 32.000 in 2005 to over 65.000 in 2009 (Monjib, 2012), to over 180.000 in 2015. The third and most important actor was the ‘independent’ press which would become a crucial unofficial political actor and factor in a time of official political stall.

According to Moroccan scholars, the ‘independent’ outlets have arguably been a genuine political opposition force which has militated on two fronts: for civil liberties and press freedom (Douai, 2009) and for socio-political governance (El Hachimi, 2007). Though this double challenge cost the ‘independent’ press a huge price by dint of heavy structural, judicial, and economic censorship, it bolstered its vibrancy and professionalism.

The argument that the ‘independent’ press assumed a political function which transcended its informational one during the first decade of the new millennium is buttressed by the following indicators:

- Decentralizing political discourse by providing a narrative different from the official one.
- Raising people’s political awareness.
- Addressing political issues and inviting people to participate in political discussion.
- Providing a comprehensive portrayal of political institutions and their responsibilities towards the citizens.
- Opening old dossiers of despotism and human rights violations. *Al Ahdath almaghribiya* daily and *Al Ayam* weekly and others were consistent in divulging classified dossiers of human rights infringements committed particularly during the three first decades of Hassan II’s reign<sup>11</sup>.
- Breaking the biggest political taboo represented by the monarchy as the major manager of political power in Morocco. Newsmagazines like *Tel Quel* and *Nichane* investigated the King, his family, his business, his entourage, etc.
- Tracking politicians and exposing their deviations and rendering them accountable before their electors. Dailies like *Almassae* was regular in providing detailed accounts of political corruption in which high officials were implicated.
- Raising the issues of reform and democratization

<sup>10</sup> The Islamist party PJD won the 2011 elections with 105 seats and the 2016 elections with 124 seats

<sup>11</sup> This period is known in Moroccan public discourse as “The years of lead”

The new trend of the Moroccan press was determined to raise issues of reform, democratization, and freedom of the press. Parallel to the political, social, and economic reform workshops initiated in 'The New Era'<sup>12</sup>, the press played the role of the mediator between the elites and the masses. It provided critical assessment of the political elite's performance against public expectations of good governance and aspirations for more freedom and democracy. Capitalizing on constructive editorial criticism and buttressed by public support, the press exerted rigorous pressure on the holders of executive power for real change. The result was a resurgence of a politicized citizenry which no longer shied away from matters of politics and freedoms and started, instead, to revisit old perceptions about politics and politicians on the basis of the unravelling realities embedded in the 'independent' papers' new discourse.

For example, for the first time in decades, 'independent' journalists launched serious demands to revise the state's policies and regulations of the media and journalism. They campaigned, through regular gatherings within the National Syndicate of the Moroccan Press (NSMP), and columns against the penalizing regulations stated in the obsolete press code of 1958 which, despite its ratification in 2002, still tightened the margins of freedom of expression and the press. They called for necessary contextualization and updating of media policies within the local environment of opening and liberalization and in light of the normative international standards of human rights, freedoms, and democracy.

## V. BREAKING TABOOS

The journey to high ratings, preponderance, and an effective political role had to traverse the thorny road of breaking taboos. The subtleties of taboos remain in earnest need of academic exploration. Still, Moroccan politics and culture offer an appropriate context for a meaningful demystification of taboo issues and how the Moroccan 'independent' press, particularly in its third phase, capitalized on encroaching upon political and cultural redlines to assert novel parameters of critical journalism in Morocco.

In the literature, the word 'taboo' ascribes to the proscription of an individual or social behaviour, assumption, or issue that is likely to yield controversy, discomfort, or harm (Allan and Burrige, 2006). In political, cultural, and media discourse, taboos pertain to the prohibition of public discourse (declarations, statements, debates, or other forms of publications) of any issue which is perceived undermining to 'national security', 'social harmony', or the 'integrity' of persons and groups.

Nevertheless, the ambiguity of some of themes such as 'national security' or 'social harmony' complicates the attempt to draw a line between permissible and proscribed discourse about them. Though 'national security', 'social harmony', and 'territorial integrity' are considered redlines in most non-libertarian and social responsibility systems<sup>13</sup>, these themes do not have the same conceptualization in different political cultural systems. These themes tend, for example, to be clearly defined in European contexts, whereas, in Morocco, they are expanded to larger areas of public discourse wherein innumerable imperceptible details may be arguably perceived as punishable trespassing in hot territories.

What is considered taboo in the Moroccan political and cultural discourse? Most works which elaborate this issue in the literature tend to concur on the existence of four or five redline areas; namely, the monarchy, morality, religion, territorial integrity, and the military institution (Said, 2002; Zaid, 2009, Zaid and Ibehine, 2011; Darif, 2012; Monjib, 2012). However, beyond these macro-topics, there are sub-themes and issues which are considered heated territories never to be trespassed. The Moroccan press law, for example, stipulates that libel against institutions like the judiciary, courts, the military, and public administrations as well as high officials like ministers, judges, and high-responsibility individuals is punishable with imprisonment and/or steep fining<sup>14</sup>.

In Morocco, the most sensitive areas in public discourse are politics and culture. These are umbrella topics which comprise institutions and functions structured and divided hierarchically and horizontally. The institutions and functions located at the top of the political and cultural hierarchies (the monarchy<sup>15</sup> and religion<sup>16</sup>, respectively) have, by dint of

<sup>12</sup> The 'New Era' frame is used in the Moroccan official discourse to mark a paradigm shift in Moroccan sociopolitical life between the late King Hassan II's reign (1961-1999) characterized by despotism and authoritarianism and that of the new King Mohammed VI's reign (1999- present) characterized by opening and democratization.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Article 10 in the European Convention of Human Rights

<sup>14</sup> Articles 45, 46, and 47 of the Press Law (2002)

<sup>15</sup> The monarchy comprises the person of the king, the members of the royal family, and the royal institution which includes the king's circle of advisors and counselors.

education and legitimization throughout history, been considered with a certain reverence and sacredness in the popular consciousness.

The sensitiveness of topics pertaining to the monarchy and religion emanates from processes of cultural education and systematic inculcation whereby the family, school, the state apparatus, the *Makhzen*, and the general society play a fundamental role (Rivet, 2012). From a 'culturalist' perspective, much of the internalization of discursive prohibition in Morocco is inherent in the heavily-loaded culture which prescribes normative frameworks of leader-sanctification and obedience, correct morality, and 'political correctness'. From a political legal perspective, redline areas are underlined in the Moroccan constitution<sup>17</sup>, the penal law, and the press law<sup>18</sup>.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Along a decade (2001-2011), the Moroccan 'independent' outlets have capitalized on broaching politically instituted and culturally inculcated redlines for commercial, political, and professional reasons. They had, first, grasped that the best way to high circulation and market preponderance was to provide a vanguard discourse about heated issues which actually did revive unprecedented public appeal and relatively high ratings. They also filled a political vacuum by articulating a political counter-discourse before the government characterized by questioning officials, investigating their integrity, and criticizing their inadequate performances. Moreover, professionally, they had understood that in order to reinforce their claim for genuine independence, they had to criticize and investigate those to whom they allegedly owe their financial sustainability and political allegiance, particularly the government.

The arguments of independence and political opposition remain technically and substantially moot. The argument of press independence is refuted by the simple fact that the very circumstances which underpinned the inception of the post-partisan press were controversial. Further, we could not envisage genuine press independence in Morocco because all outlets receive subsidies from the government, all of them are subject to governmental regulation, and all of them subtly express political and ideological inclinations in their journalistic discourse.

In addition, though the aforementioned indicators confirm the validity of argument of the 'independent' press as political opposition, this validity remains partial. The aftermath of 2010 brought about important developments in Moroccan socio-politics: important dailies and weeklies closed (2010)<sup>19</sup>, many of the most outspoken journalists left the country for good, waves of the Arab Spring reached in (February, 2011), a new constitution (July, 2011) was approved, an Islamist party (Party of Justice and Development PJD) led the government (2012), new policies restricting access to institutional information were provisioned (2014), etc. In front of these developments, journalism in Morocco entered a phase of self-censorship, normalization with the status quo, and symbiosis with the authorities.

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<sup>16</sup> Religion in Morocco refers to Islam in its moderate Sunni version, following the sect of *Imam Maalik*. Religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed (the Moroccan constitution, Article 3)

<sup>17</sup> Religion (Article 3); the king and the monarchy (Articles 41, 42, and 46) (The Moroccan Constitution, 2011)

<sup>18</sup> Articles 41 for religion, monarchy, and territorial integrity; and article 59 for morality (The Press Code, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* and *Nichane*, two critical outlets closed in 2010 due to advertisers' boycott and exorbitant fines pronounced against them.

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