

International

What the Pegasus spyware tells us about Morocco: a dictatorship in all but name

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The revelations about the use made by certain countries of the Pegasus spyware against journalists around the world have focused attention on Morocco's close surveillance of the media. As Mediapart - itself a victim of Moroccan spying - here reveals, the North African kingdom's clampdown targets not just independent journalists and publications but human rights activists too. The regime has also cynically made use of the #MeToo movement and the subsequent heightened global awareness about sexual and sexist violence to discredit those who criticise and oppose it by manipulating or fabricating evidence of a sexual nature.

Journalism is a risky profession in Morocco. The [recent investigation](#) coordinated by non-profit journalism organisation [Forbidden Stories](#) with the support of [Amnesty International's Security Lab](#) highlights this once again. Many independent journalists in the North African country feature on the list of victims tracked by the Moroccan secret services using the Pegasus spyware sold by Israeli firm NSO Group.

This should come as no great surprise. As Mediapart has constantly highlighted, journalists in Morocco have been the target of continuing repression as a result of investigations, editorials and commitment which upset the regime. This merciless repression cynically makes use of the post #MeToo era to manipulate accusations of sexual violence to discredit champions of press freedom in a society that is shaped by traditional and religious conservatism.

Some activists, such as academic Maati Monjib and journalist Omar Radi, were already aware of the espionage carried out against them. This followed the first public revelations in 2019 and 2020 about Morocco's use of the Israeli-made spyware, thanks to Forbidden Stories, Amnesty International and the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, experts in analysis of the spyware Pegasus.

Others have only discovered they were being spied on in recent months, though this will not have come as a huge shock to them, given how long they have had to live with daily harassment from the Moroccan police and courts. Among this group are Hicham Mansouri, Omar Brouksy, Hamid El Mahdaoui, Soulaïmane Raissouni and Taoufik Bouachrine. Several of them have recently faced accusations and convictions over sexual violence - rape, human trafficking, prostitution for example - which they emphatically deny.

On Monday the Moroccan government attacked as "lies" the claims that its secret services had "infiltrated the telephones of several national and foreign public figures and leaders of international organisations through software". Yet there is little doubt about the targeting of independent journalists in the country.

Only last Monday, July 19th, journalist **Omar Radi**, aged 33, who investigates the way the poor are evicted from their land, the repression of social movements, and corruption, was convicted and sentenced by a court in Casablanca for “espionage” and “rape”. The journalist, who has always denied the allegations, believes the proceedings were brought purely because of his criticism of the government. He told the court in Casablanca: “The prosecution is motivated by vengeance and not by a quest for the truth.”

Omar Radi had in fact been detained since July 2020 after being accused of rape by one of his colleagues (see *Mediapart's investigation* [here](#)). He also faced criminal proceedings for “espionage” and “damaging the security of the state” which were started two days after the revelation in June 2020 from Amnesty International that his mobile phone was under surveillance by the Moroccan authorities using the Pegasus spyware. The journalist has previously said the prosecution was motivated by the publication of that report.

In the rape case the journalist said that he had had “freely consensual relations” with the female colleague in question, something she denied. The status of the sole witness in the case, his colleague and friend Imad Stitou, who confirmed the story of consensual relation with the complainant, was subsequently switched from that of ‘witness’ to suspected ‘accomplice’.

The 32-year-old Stitou has himself now been convicted in the case and given a year’s jail sentence, six months of which were suspended. He is currently free.

The two journalists also have to pay damages of around 19,000 euros, with Imad Stitou having to contribute around one third. The [Twitter account](#) of the Moroccan journalist Aida Alami, who covered the court hearings, gives a flavour of the unfair way in which justice is carried out in Morocco.

Even before his latest legal travails, against which he can appeal, Omar Radi had been in trouble with the authorities. He was detained for the first time in December 2019 after returning from a trip to Algeria. That detention was for contempt of court for a tweet eight months earlier in which he criticised the heavy sentences given to activists in the [Hirak Rif Movement](#). This was a popular protest in the north of the country in 2016 and 2017 which was violently put down by the authorities. After a national and international campaign the journalist was freed, though not before being given a four-month suspended prison sentence.

In June this year Omar Radi staged a hunger strike for 22 days before ending it for health reasons. He started it at the same time as one begun by [Soulaimane Raissouni](#), aged 49, an acclaimed journalist and editorialist who has never been afraid to criticise the king and his entourage by name, in particular the all-powerful head of Morocco’s secret services [Abdellatif Hammouchi](#). The latter is the “architect of the slide towards security crackdowns and authoritarianism in Morocco and is the real king of Morocco”, says one French diplomat who asked to remain anonymous.

On July 9th this year Soulaimane Raissouni was sentenced to five years imprisonment for “sexual assault” after a summary trial at which neither he nor his lawyers were present (see *Mediapart's article* [here](#)) to give his side of events. The former editor of *Akhbar Al Youm*, one of the last independent newspapers in the country – it stopped publication in March having been slowly stifled by the regime – has now been on hunger strike for more than a hundred days.

Yet despite his poor state of health, the judicial authorities have constantly denied Soulaimane Raissouni’s requests and rights. These demands ranged from a wheelchair so he could attend the hearings, allowing a witness who could acquit him to be heard and emergency hospitalisation. In the end he was convicted on the basis of a single witness statement: written by a LGBT rights activist

and published on Facebook on [May 14th 2020](#).

His conviction was greeted with deafening silence in France but the United States reacted publicly. “We believe the judicial process that led to his verdict contradicts the Moroccan system’s fundamental promise of fair trials for individuals accused of crimes, and it is inconsistent with the promise of the 2011 constitution and His Majesty King Mohammed VI’s reform agenda,” [said](#) US State Department spokesperson Ned Price on July 12th.

Soulaimane Raissouni is the uncle of Hajar Raissouni, who also worked for *Akhbar Al Youm*. This talented young reporter, who covered the Hirak Rif Movement, was convicted on September 30th 2019 and given a one-year jail sentence, based on rigged medical reports, for “illegal abortion, unlawful sexual relations, immoral behaviour” after she was arrested following an appointment with a gynaecologist. After an outcry both in Morocco and abroad over her imprisonment, Hajar Raissouni was eventually freed on October 16th 2019 following a royal pardon. Today she lives in exile in Sudan.

“Everyone’s become a target”.

The former editor of *Akhbar Al Youm*, **Taoufik Bouachrine**, meanwhile, is still languishing in jail. In 2019 he was given a 12-year prison sentence - at the end of a trial judged “unfair” by the United Nations working group on arbitrary detention - for “abuse of power for sexual purposes” and “rape and attempted rape”. On appeal the sentence was increased to 15 years.

His mobile phone was not the only one to have been targeted by Pegasus spyware; his wife’s phone and those of at least five of the complainants whose evidence was used against him were also targeted.

Out of the 15 women initially reported by the Moroccan press to have accused Taoufik Bouachrine, eight ultimately either declined to give evidence or openly retracted their statements. One of them, Afaf Bernani, was even convicted for this and given a six-month prison sentence for “falsifying a statement”. Now in exile, she says that the Moroccan regime “constantly uses allegations of sexual assault to silence opponents”.

The historian and human rights activist [Maati Monjib](#), aged 60, who is one of the most high-profile critics of Mohammed VI’s reign, was provisionally released on March 23rd 2021 after three months in detention and a [hunger strike](#).

The Moroccan intellectual, who set up the Association Marocaine pour le Journalisme d’Investigation (AMJI), had already been convicted and given a year’s jail sentence for “fraud” and “damaging state security”. The judgement was delivered at the end of January this year at a hearing to which neither he nor his lawyers were called.

That conviction was the culmination of a legal process that had dragged on for five years in which

the trial was put back 20 times - and in the end never took place. Back in November 2015 Maati Monjib and six other members of AMJI - three of them journalists - were accused of "damaging state security" and "illegal foreign financing" for having organised training in investigative journalism.

Among the other accused in that case was **Hicham Mansouri**. He spent ten months in a Moroccan jail in 2015 for being an "accomplice to adultery" and only just avoided being prosecuted for pimping. He is today in exile in France but even here he cannot escape the clutches of the Moroccan authorities who keep watch on him.

"There's a climate of inquisition," Hicham Mansouri [told](#) Mediapart and *L'Humanité* in September 2020. "They know all our faults, all our weaknesses. They know us better than we know ourselves. The objective is that everyone ends up thinking they might be a potential target. Sex, drugs, alcohol ... if they find nothing they fabricate the accusations."

The manipulation of private lives, and accusations of rape or sexual assault against journalists and opponents of the regime is nothing new among Morocco's police and security services. But it was always used sparingly. Today, following the #MeToo movement and the greater awareness over sexual violence, the authorities there have used the smear tactic more and more.

"Giving opponents a bad reputation is a way of isolating them, to frighten all the others, to silence everyone. Defamation is like a poison, it's very cynical. It's a lot more effective than prison and physical repression. People are afraid of getting tainted. Reputation is like glass. Once it's broken it can't be stuck back together again," Maati Monjib told Mediapart and *L'Humanité*. He felt he was being tracked even during his trips to France. The proof that he was indeed being watched came during Mediapart's videoconference with him when a third party briefly appeared on the call, even though it was in theory only accessible via a confidential link.

In March 2021 the economist Fouad Abdelmoumni, former president of the human rights group Association Marocaine de Défense des Droits Humains and a member of Transparency Maroc, [told](#) Mediapart and *L'Humanité* how he had been filmed in private without his knowledge.

In February 2020, just before his marriage and "after months of harassment, of threats, of bullying, including about tax, and malicious phonecalls from people claiming they were from the police", his parents-in-law and several of his friends received seven videos that had been recorded without his knowledge at his second home. They showed scenes of sexual relations with his partner. In Morocco sexual relations outside of marriage are banned.

Fouad Abdelmoumni was imprisoned twice during the reign of Hassan II - who ruled from 1961 to 1999 - first at the age of 19 and then again at the age of 25, and has since been under close watch by the police. Yet though he was well-versed in the regime's methods he had never before had to endure this "sexual strategy" of blackmail and humiliation. He was one of the 1,400 journalists and activists around the world who in October 2019 learnt from the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto that their phone has been hacked with the Pegasus spyware.

In November 2020 it was Mohamed Ziane, a former human rights minister, lawyer and head of the Moroccan Liberal Party (PML), who saw his reputation tainted by a local media that is known for dishing out defamatory reports on the government's orders. The website [ChoufTV](#) broadcast images filmed with a hidden camera of this former barrister naked in the presence of a woman. She was apparently his client Ouahiba Khoukhech, a former police officer who has today sought refuge in the United States, and who had accused a senior figure in the security services - someone close to security service boss [Abdellatif Hammouchi](#) - of sexual harassment and attempted rape.

Fouad Abdelmoumni has no doubts about what is going on. "The state, or at least a part of the government, wants to send us a message that we are living under the regime of a straightforward dictatorship and no longer in a state that claims to be heading towards democracy," he said. "Those who hold the real power and those who carry out their despicable works have total impunity. We're not in the situation of dictatorships such as those that spread terror in Latin America in the 1970s or in the Egypt of [Field Marshal \[Abdel Fattah\] el-Sisi](#), but we are indeed in a state where royal diktat prevails."

A camera in her bedroom, in her house, invading her privacy, is indeed a "nightmare" for 'Houria', not her real name. She describes a fear whose shadow creeps a little further over Morocco every day, touching people from all parts of society, from the working classes to the terrified elites. She is the daughter of opposition figures who were jailed under Hassan II, is the head of a human rights association, is married to an entrepreneur from the upper middle classes, and comes from a family of left-wing activists. So she is "accustomed to pressures, to being eavesdropped, to being followed, to plain-clothed police being outside the building day and night".

But even she no longer talks much and when she does it is anonymously, using an encrypted messaging service, as she says she is "stunned by what is happening in Morocco". She has also quit social media, one of the areas where repression is carried out. "Everyone's become a target," she said, from journalists to opposition figures, from intellectuals to ordinary citizens.

At the end of June 2021 a blogger was given a two-month prison sentence and fined for a post on Facebook which criticised an ongoing curse of Moroccan society: [child prostitution](#). Even foreign journalists who take an interest in the other side of Morocco, away from the picture postcard views, and who try to tell the real story of the country, find obstacles put in their way, are targeted by campaigns to discredit them or are expelled from the country. At the beginning of July 2021 a team of Spanish journalists was [put on a flight back](#) to Spain. They had been due to speak to the families of 29 victims, most of them women, who had [drowned in the basement of an illegal textile factory](#) when it flooded in February.

"We are witnessing a retreat into authoritarianism which recalls the dark years of Hassan II. Colossal resources are being deployed to discredit and silence us," said Houria. She said that the reduction in terms of human rights and freedoms had accelerated in pace since the violent repression of the Hirak Rif Movement. These [angry protests](#) from 2016 and 2017 were triggered by the death of a young fishmonger who was crushed with his fish in a rubbish lorry. His death became a symbol of *hogra* or injustice and of the regime's humiliation of the Moroccan people. It was the biggest outpouring of anger in the country under the rule of Mohammed VI and was followed by other social protests - which were also repressed - such as one in [Jerada](#) in the north east of the country.

"You don't speak about the king, you don't speak ill of the king."

Since then, said Houria, the “suffocation” by the state has got ever worse. “It even reaches a public figure of the highest level, the wife or ex-wife of the king – we don’t even know her status – whom they have made vanish. Imagine if Brigitte Macron had disappeared in France for three years and no one had the right to question her disappearance,” said Houria. She links the fate of Morocco’s first lady to that of princesses in the Middle East, [in the United Arab Emirates](#) and Jordan, who have been mistreated to the point where they have been held in confinement or run away.

[Salma Bennani](#), aged 43, who married Mohammed VI in 2002, and who was proclaimed as a sign of the king’s modernity, has indeed disappeared from the public scene in Morocco. Her last appearance dates back to the winter of 2017. The couple are said to have got divorced but their separation has never been officially confirmed, either by the palace or her.

Since her glaring absence from the king’s side, for example when the monarch was surrounded by his sisters, brother and children after a successful heart operation for arrhythmia in Paris on February 26th 2018, the international media has been full of rumours. But it is a taboo subject for the media inside Morocco itself. It is one more red line not to cross for local journalists, along with the king’s health and the [independence movement in the Sahara](#); and it says a great deal about both the archaic nature of the monarchy in Morocco and the situation of women there.

“You don’t speak about the king, you don’t speak ill of the king.” As children ‘Souad’ and ‘Ali’ – not their real names – grew up listening to this order. Forty years later the couple now pass the same injunction on to their own children and make sure that in public they punctuate their conversations with the mantra “3acha al malik! (“Long live the king!”). They do not want them to be seen as dissidents or separatists. The family lives in poverty in the Rif, an area that has been marginalised and punished by the government, something which has “added to the problems” of this impoverished rural area in northern Morocco.

Souad and Ali are “afraid”, just like Houria and a growing number of Moroccans. They are afraid of the repression, of arbitrary acts by the authorities and of the [Makhzen](#), the state apparatus in Morocco which can lash out at you for a word out of place, criticism, or the mere act of seeking justice or dignity – including on the internet. So many families around them “live in chaos”.

On the wall of their living room they have framed a portrait of the king Mohammed VI. They were in their twenties when the 22nd monarch of the Alaouite dynasty was crowned on [July 30th 1999](#). It was a day of celebration and hope, even here in the remote mountains where the people have a reputation for being rebellious. The coronation of the new king was supposedly the dawn of a modern monarchy that was going to take Morocco into a new era and one diametrically opposed to the merciless reign of his father Hassan II.

Twenty-two years later Souad and Ali still respect “M6” – Mohammed VI – for what he represents, in particular the country’s stability. But they are equally aware that he has not been able to keep his promises and that he has not deserved the nickname “king of the poor” for a long time. They see, too, that in two decades in power he has increased the three great ills in the country – inequality, poverty and corruption – rather than reduced them. The couple have also seen the “return of the stick and belt” – repression – and that the king, who has become one of the wealthiest people on the planet, has fallen back into some of the worst past practices of the Alaouite monarchy.

The other day the couple’s son Ahmed used the word “dictatorship”. They immediately reprimanded him and said: “You poor soul, never say that again!” There are lots of tragic stories in the village and surrounding area. One local was given ten years imprisonment, another twelve years, just for protesting peacefully during the recent demonstrations, which called for a better life, economic and social rights, schools, hospitals, roads, work and bread.

Dozens of husbands, sons and fathers remain locked up and tortured in the country's jails, hours or even days away by bus from the family home via isolated roads. Some of them have been sent down for 20 years, with their sentences upheld and sometimes even increased on appeal by the top appeal court the [Cour de Cassation](#). An example of this was Nasser Zefzafi, an unemployed man in his thirties who had become the media face of the movement.

Even one of the demonstrators' lawyers, Abdessadak El Bouchtaoui, was given a 20-month prison sentence. He appealed and as soon as he could went into exile. Today he has been granted political asylum in France the "friendly country" which has been so quiet about the abuses and nature of a Moroccan regime that has not been afraid to [spy on an independent French newspaper](#) and several other journalists.

In February 2018 around 15 *baltaguia* - the Arabic word for a lackey hired to disrupt political opponents - tasked by the Moroccan security services were able to sabotage a [conference held in Paris](#) about press freedom in Morocco without the slightest reaction from the French authorities.

They started by insulting the guests, among them Khadija Ryadi, a prominent Moroccan activist, and the journalist Hicham Mansouri, who was spied on with the Pegasus software. They then hurled chairs and stink bombs before cutting the building's power and plunging the meeting room into darkness as they shouted "long live the king!".

La rédaction de Mediapart

P.S.

- Mediapart. July 21, 2021:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/210721/what-pegasus-spyware-tells-us-about-morocco-dictatorship-all-name>
- English version by Michael Streeter
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