

IFJ Says Sentence Imposed on Moroccan Journalists over Joke Issue "Punitive and Unfair"

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The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) today said the three-year suspended jail sentence and heavy fine imposed by a Moroccan court on two journalists for publishing a list of popular jokes about Islam, sex and politics is "punitive and unfair."

The decision by the Casablanca first instance court against the journalists of the Arab-language weekly *Nichane*, which was also banned for two months, has highlighted the "gaping chasm between free thinkers and an Arab-world old-guard that appears to have lost touch with reality," said Aidan White, IFJ General Secretary.

The court ordered *Nichane* Director Driss Ksikess and journalist Sanaa Al-Aji to pay a fine of about 8,000 US\$ saying they published material that was "harmful to Islam," even though the editorial staff had apologised and made a statement saying that the publication never intended to "hurt" the feelings of Muslim readers. Last week the two accused journalists had told the court the jokes were published merely to accompany an analysis of Moroccan society.

"It is an extraordinary attack on free journalism from a country that should be setting standards for democracy, not undermining the role of media in helping people better understand the world in which they live," said White.

Although Morocco's press is widely seen as one of the freest in the Arab world, journalists can still find themselves before a judge under repressive laws when they overstep some limits like questioning the king's role as guardian of Islam. This problem of legal restraint on the work of media throughout the Arab world will feature in a regional debate for Middle Eastern journalists' unions being organised by the IFJ in Algeria later this month.

For more information contact the IFJ at 32 2 235 2207

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