

Morocco editor convicted for defamation

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Casablanca - A Moroccan editor was handed a two month suspended prison sentence on Monday for defamation, after writing that an Islamist minister had organised a lavish, alcohol-fuelled dinner during an official trip abroad.

The court in a suburb of Casablanca also fined Youssef Jajili, the director of Al-Aan magazine, 50 000 dirhams (€4 500), and ordered him to pay a symbolic dirham to the plaintiff, Minister of Industry and Trade Abdelkader Amara. Jajili, who had been charged with disseminating false information, was not present in court when the ruling was announced, but his lawyer said he would appeal.

"This ruling is unjustified. The court did not consider our requests... We will continue to fight for the freedom of expression," Brahim Rachidi told AFP.

Amara, who belongs to the ruling Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD), filed a complaint after the publication last year of an article claiming he had organised a sumptuous champagne dinner during a trip to Burkina Faso that cost 10 000 dirhams of public money.

The minister said at the time that the magazine supported its claims with "false witnesses and a false copy of the bill," calling the article "an attack on his honour and dignity" that was aimed at "undermining the PJD".

During the five month trial, the editor defended the claims, saying he had a supporting document which he refused to show the court, arguing that to do so would endanger his sources.

His lawyer emphasised that the article had not accused the minister of consuming alcohol.

Reporters Without Borders condemned Monday's ruling.

"Two years after the adoption of a new constitution... this prison sentence for defamation, even if suspended, and heavy fine, shows how little of the promised reform of Morocco's press code has been achieved," the press watchdog said.

Amnesty International had in February urged the court to drop the charges against Jajili, who it said made several attempts to interview the minister and published the article only after thorough investigative work.

The rights group said the case was "a stark reminder that despite their promised reforms and pledged commitment to upholding freedom of expression, the Moroccan authorities continue to stifle criticism".