

Morocco: Abandon Attempts to Dissolve Cultural Group

18 January 2019, 05:00 UTC

Moroccan authorities should immediately abandon attempts to dissolve the cultural group [Racines](#), over critical comments made by guests on an online talk show it hosted, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said today.

[Racines](#), a Casablanca-based association, was targeted because its office was used as a venue to record an episode of the talk show ‘1 Dîner 2 Cons’ (One Dinner, Two Fools) on August 5, 2018. Human Rights Watch’s Ahmed Benchemsi was one of six guests invited to comment on Moroccan news during the episode that was posted on YouTube on August 24. During the show, some guests criticized King Mohammed VI’s speeches and policies, in a context of increased police repression of street protests. The episode has been [viewed](#) more than half a million times.

“The talk show ‘1 Dîner 2 Cons’ is one of the very few spaces left for free, uncensored speech in Morocco,” said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

“By seeking the dissolution of the organization that hosted it, authorities are sending a grim message to the dwindling ranks of critical journalists and commentators in Morocco, and that message is ‘Shut up.’”

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On October 9, the governor of Casablanca-Anfa, a high-ranking official in the Interior Ministry, wrote to Casablanca’s general prosecutor, requesting Racines’ dissolution on the grounds that the group had “organized an activity including interviews interspersed with clear offenses towards institutions (... and in which) political opinions were expressed that are very remote from the purposes for which the association was created.” The governor’s letter refers to the episode of ‘1 Dîner 2 Cons’ recorded on August 5. The general prosecutor petitioned the court on November 13 to dissolve Racines on the grounds raised by the governor’s letter.

Racines was neither the organizer of ‘1 Dîner 2 Cons’ nor the party that posted the recorded show on YouTube. The show was not posted on the group’s website or YouTube channel. “The association merely offered its Casablanca office as a venue for recording the show, at the request of its creators and hosts, journalists Amine Belghazi and Youssef El Mouedden,” Racines’ president, Raymond Benhaim, told Human Rights Watch. On December 26, the court ruled in the prosecutor’s favor and ordered that Racines be dissolved. The group published on January 15 [a press release](#) in which it announced its decision to appeal.

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“The decision to dissolve Racines is a blow blatantly intended to intimidate critics into silence. No one should be punished for peacefully expressing their opinions or for criticizing institutions,” said Heba Morayef, Middle East and North Africa director at Amnesty International.

“If the Moroccan authorities are serious about their constitutional and international commitment to guarantee freedom of expression and association, all attempts to shut down Racines should be immediately dropped.”

In its written judgment, the first instance court cited article 36 of the Law on Associations, which states that “any association engaged in an activity other than the ones provided for by its statutes may be dissolved.”

By mentioning an article of Racines’ 2015 statutes defining the association’s objectives to include “enabling access to culture, establishing a cultural policy in Morocco, and organizing cultural events,” the court seemed to imply that hosting a show like ‘1 Dîner 2 Cons’ was beyond the scope of the association’s stated objectives. But Racines’ 2015 statutes include “activism for freedom of speech” among its objectives. Its updated 2018 statutes add that part of Racines’ mission is to implement “debates (...) concerning free speech.”

Associations should be free to determine their statutes and activities and make decisions without state interference. The rules governing organizations should not be used as a pretext to suppress exercise of human rights such as the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said.

[1 Dîner, 2 Cons](#) is a YouTube-based talk show in which the two hosts, self-described as “fools,” invite journalists, artists, and others to debate casually and in an offbeat tone, over dinner, a range of political and social controversial topics. It has been broadcasting since 2016. This is the first time authorities have taken legal action in response.

The relevant episode, which is titled “The Nihilists’ Saga” and is [available online](#) divided into three segments, features Ahmed Benchemsi, the Human Rights Watch advocacy and communications director for the Middle East and North Africa; Omar Radi, a journalist; Barry, a singer; Jawad El Hamidi, a religious freedom advocate; Aadel Essaadani, a cultural activist and Racines staff member; and Rachid Aourraz, an economist. Several guests criticized the King’s failure to ensure accountability in relation to the increase of police repression. One guest also mentioned the corruption that, according to him, plagued the Interior Ministry’s handling of a major social program initiated by the King in 2005.

Since the 2000’s, many independent media outlets have closed in Morocco and their founders have left the country, after years of harassment and intimidation. The government has imprisoned journalists, confiscated publications, seized assets, subjected journalists to unfair trials with disproportionate fines, and led advertising boycotts. Several journalists and

commentators, including [strong critics](#) of state policy, are currently in jail. Morocco-based television channels [refrain](#) from any criticism of royal policies and practices.

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