

Advocacy dossier

Nasser Zefzafi

ناصر الزفزافي

Imprisoned (serving sentence) **Morocco**

Nasser Zefzafi led the 2016 and 2017 Hirak protests in Morocco's Rif region and is serving a 20-year prison sentence that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found arbitrary. He remained in prison in Tangier as of late October 2026.

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The case at a glance

Nasser Zefzafi led the 2016 and 2017 Hirak protests in Morocco's Rif region and is serving a 20-year prison sentence that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found arbitrary. He remained in prison in Tangier as of late October 2026.

Status **Imprisoned (serving sentence)**	Arrested **29 May 2017**	Country **Morocco**
Sentence 20 years in prison		
Charges Undermining the internal security of the State Participating in an armed rebellion Contempt of law enforcement officers		

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Release Nasser Zefzafi immediately and unconditionally.

02 Drop all charges related to the peaceful exercise of fundamental rights.

03 Ensure unrestricted access to legal counsel, family, and adequate medical care while in detention.

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How the case unfolded

29 May 2017

Arrest

Arrested in Al Hoceima

Police arrested Nasser Zefzafi in El Harch, Al Hoceima, and flew him by helicopter to the national police headquarters in Casablanca, where he was held without contact with his family or lawyers until 5 June 2017. He reported being tortured during the arrest.

5 June 2017

Charge filed

Charged and placed in Oukacha prison

He was charged with two felonies and seven misdemeanours, including undermining the internal security of the State and participating in an armed rebellion, and was held in Oukacha prison in Casablanca.

September 2017

Solitary confinement imposed

Held in solitary confinement for almost a year

He was held in solitary confinement from September 2017 to August 2018.

23 May 2018

Hunger strike begins

On hunger strike over the trial and detention conditions

Nasser Zefzafi was on hunger strike from 23 May to 3 June 2018 in protest at the unfair nature of the trials and poor conditions of detention, while held in prolonged solitary confinement. Twenty-two other detainees joined in solidarity for between four and 19 days.

26 June 2018

Conviction

Sentenced to 20 years in a mass trial

The Criminal Chamber of the Casablanca Court of Appeal convicted him at first instance, after a collective trial of Hirak defendants that had opened in September 2017 and ran to more than 80 hearings, and sentenced him to 20 years in prison. Nabil Ahamjik also received 20 years; other defendants received one to 15 years. Most defendants said they had been pressured into signing statements they could not read.

9 October 2018

Other act

Named a finalist for the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize

The European Parliament named Nasser Zefzafi one of three finalists for the 2018 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, alongside Oleg Sentsov and a group of NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean. The prize went to Oleg Sentsov.

April 2019

Appeal: judgment upheld

Appeal court upholds the 20-year sentence

The Casablanca Court of Appeal upheld the 20-year sentence. His lawyer described the ruling as shocking.

11 April 2019

Transfer between places of detention

Transferred to Ras El Ma prison in Fez

He was transferred to Ras El Ma prison in Fez, where he remained until 2020, when he was moved to a prison in Tangier.

23 June 2021

Final judgment

Court of Cassation confirms the sentence

The Court of Cassation confirmed the 20-year sentence, making it final.

19 January 2023

Other act

European Parliament calls for his release

The European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Nasser Zefzafi and criticising the flawed trials and convictions of Hirak protesters.

30 August 2024

Other act

UN Working Group finds his detention arbitrary

Acting on a petition filed on 23 November 2023 by MENA Rights Group, Freedom House and the Committee for Justice, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention adopted an opinion finding his detention arbitrary and in violation of international law, and called for his release without delay.

29 July 2025

Other act

Rights groups ask the King for his humanitarian release

FIDH, OMCT, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, MENA Rights Group, ISHR and other organisations wrote to King Mohammed VI asking for Nasser Zefzafi's release on humanitarian grounds so that he could care for his father, who had been diagnosed with stage IV cancer.

4 September 2025

Other act

Granted temporary leave to attend his father's funeral

The prison administration exceptionally allowed him to leave the local prison of Tangier to attend the funeral of his father in Al Hoceima. His father had died the previous day after a long illness. It was his second humanitarian leave that year, after a visit to his father in hospital in May 2025. He then returned to prison.

8 December 2025

Hunger strike begins

On 8 December 2025, Zefzafi began a hunger and thirst strike

9 December 2025

Hunger strike ends

He suspended the strike the following day

28 October 2026

Other act

Still imprisoned ten years after the Rif protests began

Ten years after the Hirak protests began, Nasser Zefzafi remains in prison serving his 20-year sentence, one of six prominent Hirak figures still held, among them Nabil Ahamjik, who is also held in Tangier. No pardon or release has been reported.

03
The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Nasser Zefzafi remains in prison in Tangier, more than nine years into a 20-year sentence that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found arbitrary in 2024. No pardon or release has been reported.

Background and Work

Nasser Zefzafi is the best-known leader of the Hirak El-Rif, a peaceful protest movement that emerged in Al Hoceima and the wider Rif region of northern Morocco in late October 2016, after the death of the fish seller Mouhcine Fikri. The movement drew tens of thousands of people to demonstrations calling for an end to the marginalisation of the Rif's Amazigh-speaking communities, better health care and infrastructure, more jobs and an end to corruption.

The Arrest

On 26 May 2017 he interrupted the Friday sermon at the Mohammed V mosque in Al Hoceima, accusing the imam of speaking for the authorities. Three days later, on 29 May 2017, officers of the National Judicial Police Brigade broke into the house in El Harch where he was staying, took him to Al Hoceima airport and flew him by helicopter, hooded and handcuffed, to the national police headquarters in Casablanca. He was held there without contact with his family or lawyers until 5 June 2017. He reported being beaten during the arrest and in custody, and told the court that officers threatened to rape his mother in front of him if he did not sign a statement.

Detention Conditions and Health

After being charged on 5 June 2017 he was held in Oukacha prison in Casablanca, where he spent almost a year in solitary confinement, from September 2017 to August 2018. From 23 May to 3 June 2018 he was on hunger strike in protest at the trial and his conditions of detention, and 22 other detainees joined him for periods of four to 19 days. On 11 April 2019 he was transferred to Ras El Ma prison in Fez, and in 2020 to a prison in Tangier, where he remains. In May 2025 and again on 4 September 2025 the prison administration allowed him short humanitarian leave, first to visit his father in hospital and then to attend his father's funeral in Al Hoceima; he returned to prison each time.

Legal Proceedings

He was charged with two felonies and seven misdemeanours, including undermining the internal security of the State, participating in an armed rebellion and contempt of law enforcement officers. He was tried with dozens of other Hirak defendants before the Criminal Chamber of the Casablanca Court of Appeal in a trial that opened in September 2017 and ran to more than 80 hearings. On 26 June 2018 the court sentenced him and Nabil Ahamjik to 20 years in prison and the other defendants to between one and 15 years. Fifty of 53 defendants said they had been pressured into signing statements they could not read, and the appeal court did not exclude those statements. The case of the journalist Hamid El Mahdaoui, arrested in connection with the protests, was tried separately. The Casablanca Court of Appeal confirmed his sentence in April 2019, and the Court of Cassation made it final on 23 June 2021.

International Response

Amnesty International described the 2018 verdicts as the result of unfair trials and called for them to be overturned. In October 2018 the European Parliament named him one of three finalists for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. On 19 January 2023 the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for his immediate and unconditional release. On 30 August 2024, acting on a petition by MENA Rights Group, Freedom House and the Committee for Justice, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his detention arbitrary and called for his release without delay. On 29 July 2025 FIDH, OMCT, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, MENA Rights Group, ISHR and other organisations asked King Mohammed VI to release him on humanitarian grounds so that he could care for his father, who had stage IV cancer; his father, Ahmed Zefzafi, died on 3 September 2025. In October 2026, ten years after the protests began, Middle East Eye reported that he was one of six prominent Hirak figures still in prison.

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