Morocco | Authorities must release rapper and filmmaker El Mahdi Lyoubi and drop charges targeting his artistic expression

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Ahead of the 31 July hearing in El Mahdi Lyoubi's case before the Ain Sebaa First Instance Court in Casablanca, following the court's decision at the first hearing on 22 July to reject his request for provisional release and adjourn the proceedings while maintaining all charges against him, HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement calls on the Moroccan authorities to immediately release the rapper and filmmaker, better known by his stage name Mehdi Black Wind, drop all charges against him arising solely from his peaceful expression or artistic work, and end the use of criminal proceedings to punish the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression.

El Mahdi Lyoubi, 34 year old Moroccan rapper, documentary filmmaker and activist, who has been residing in Marseille, France since 2017, has been detained by the Moroccan authorities since 15 July 2026 after security forces have prevented him from leaving the country and initiated criminal proceedings against him in connection with his artistic work and songs.

On 10 July 2026, border police stopped Lyoubi at Rabat–Salé Airport as he was preparing to board a flight back to Marseille after informing him that he was subject to a travel ban. Subsequently, he was summoned by the National Brigade of Judicial Police who questioned and placed him in police custody. Lyoubi was later brought before the prosecutor and an investigating judge ordered his pre-trial detention on 15 July. Authorities transferred him to Oukacha Prison in Casablanca, where he remains detained for the past two weeks.

The proceedings against Lyoubi are taking place amid a nationwide strike by Moroccan lawyers led by the Association of Moroccan Bar Associations. The strike, launched in protest against proposed judicial and legislative reforms that lawyers say undermine the legal profession and access to justice, has included boycotts of court hearings and other judicial procedures. As a result, court operations have been disrupted in some cases, with hearings postponed and access to legal representation affected.

El Mahdi Lyoubi is a polyvalent artist whose work addresses issues of public interest, including social inequality, corruption, youth marginalization and police abuses. Through his music, documentaries and public advocacy, he has expressed support for social justice causes and youth-led movements in Morocco. His artistic and political expression is protected under international human rights law.

Lyoubi is being prosecuted under Article 179 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes ”anyone who commits defamation, insult, or an infringement of the private life of the person of the King or the Crown Prince, or who violates the duty of reverence and respect toward the person of the King”, a charge punishable by up to two years in prison and a fine of up to 200,000 dirhams.

According to trusted reports, the case is linked to the lyrics of one of Lyoubi’ songs, which his supporters describe as criticism of Moroccan authorities as well as political, and socioeconomic grievances. On 22 July, Lyoubi appeared before Ain Sebaa first instance court, presented a request for provisional release and that the court hearing be adjourned, giving him appropriate time to prepare his defence given that the lawyers’ strike had prevented him access to legal counsel. The court rejected his request for provisional release and set a new date for the hearing on 31 July.

The prosecution of El Mahdi Lyoubi occurs amid growing concerns regarding restrictions on freedom of expression, peaceful dissent, and civic space in Morocco. In late September 2025, Morocco witnessed its largest wave of youth-led protests in years, organized by the decentralized Gen Z 212 movement through social media platforms such as Discord, TikTok, and Instagram. Demonstrations spread across major cities, including Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, Agadir, and Marrakech, with protesters demanding greater investment in public healthcare and education, action against corruption, and an end to policies they viewed as prioritizing costly sporting events, over essential public services. Authorities responded with excessive use of force, arresting and prosecuting thousands of peaceful demonstrators, and prompting widespread criticism from national and international human rights organizations.

Shortly before Lyoubi’s arrest, independent French-Moroccan journalist Ali Lmrabet was arrested on 12 July 2026 at Tangier Ibn Battouta Airport after arriving from Spain, where he resides. He was questioned by the BNPJ in Casablanca over public statements and was later released on 15 July while criminal proceedings related to allegations of defamation and libel against him continue. Lmrabet is one of Morocco’s most prominent independent journalists. His current case follows a long history of restrictions and judicial harassment against him, including the closure of his publications Demain Magazine and its Arabic counterpart, Doumane in the early 2000s and a ten-year ban on practicing journalism.

The authorities’ actions against Lyoubii and Lmrabet come amid broader concerns over the shrinking space for independent journalism, human rights advocacy, and peaceful criticism. Moroccan authorities have also faced criticism over restrictions on freedom of association and assembly. On 15 July 2026, the Network of Associations Victims of Restrictions and Repression (known by its French acronym, RAVI and formed in 2014) organized a protest outside Parliament in Rabat to denounce administrative obstacles to establishing associations and restrictions affecting associations’ ability to organize meetings and public activities, as well as other restrictions.

> **Khadija Ainani, member of the Administrative Commission at the Morocco League for Human Rights, who spoke with HuMENA said that:**
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> **“the reality of rights and freedoms in Morocco is very bad and bitter, everyday there are**

> **more arrests and restrictions. Lyoubi's arrest and subsequent prosecution come in the same context, that's why we insist that he's released at once and charges against him dropped because you can't prosecute a person for expressing themselves peacefully and freely."**

The case of Lyoubi has attracted significant attention both within Morocco and internationally. More than 500 Moroccan artists, civil society actors and intellectuals have signed a petition calling for his immediate release and affirming the rights to freedom of expression and the right to free and peaceful artistic creation. Solidarity events have also been organized in several European cities, underscoring growing international concern over his unjust prosecution.

HuMENA recalls that peaceful criticism of state institutions, political authorities, and public policies should never constitute grounds for criminal prosecution or imprisonment. Deprivation of liberty must remain an exceptional measure and must not be used as punishment for the peaceful exercise of fundamental rights.

Article 25 of the Moroccan Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, opinion and expression, as well as freedom of creation and publication in literary, artistic, scientific and technical fields.

Morocco is bound by international and regional human rights obligations protecting freedom of expression and artistic freedom. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Morocco is party, guarantees the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media, including artistic expression. Any restriction on this right must be prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate. In its General Comment No. 34, the UN Human Rights Committee has emphasized that public figures, including heads of state, are legitimately subject to criticism and should not receive special protection from criticism solely because of their status. It has also affirmed that artistic expression (including music, song lyrics, film, literature, and satire) is protected under Article 19. Morocco is also a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), whose Article 15 protects artistic and cultural creation.

At the regional level, Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights protects the right to receive information and to express and disseminate opinions. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' 2019 Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa likewise recognizes artistic creativity, cultural expression, satire, and political commentary as protected forms of expression and requires that any restrictions comply with the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality.

HuMENA calls on the Moroccan authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release El Mahdi Lyoubi and drop all charges against him arising solely from his peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and artistic creation.
- Remove any travel restrictions or other measures preventing him from returning to France, where he has been residing.
- For as long as he remains detained or subject to criminal proceedings, ensure his immediate

access to independent legal counsel, adequate time and facilities to prepare his defence, and full respect for all fair-trial guarantees.

- Repeal or amend criminal provisions that permit the prosecution of peaceful political or artistic expression, and bring Moroccan law into conformity with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.
- Ensure that journalists, human rights defenders, artists, activists, and civil society actors can exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly without intimidation, prosecution, or detention solely because of their peaceful work or expression.

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