

Morocco loses leading human rights activist

Human Rights Watch mourns the death of Moroccan human rights activist Driss Benzekri, who died on Sunday aged 57. He was the driving force behind the public, televised testimonies by victims of past repression in cities around the country.

Rabat – Prior to Benzekri's efforts, human rights abuses in Morocco did not receive much notice, but his initiative in harnessing TV to publicise the issue served to bring it into the limelight.

Arrested for his left-wing student activities in 1974, Benzekri served the next 17 years as a political prisoner. Freed in 1991 by the late King Hassan II, Benzekri immersed himself in the human rights work that consumed him until the end of his days.

Benzekri started working in 1993 at the Rabat headquarters of the independent Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (OMDH).

In 1999 he left the OMDH to co-found and direct the Moroccan Forum for Truth and Equity (FVJ), an organization that advocated on behalf of victims of repression under the late King Hassan II. In 2000, advisors to the newly enthroned King Mohamed VI approached Benzekri and the FVJ to explore how the regime might address the demands of those who had suffered human rights abuses under Hassan II, father of the present monarch.

A first for the region

In 2004, Mohamed VI created the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC), the first truth commission to be established in a Middle Eastern or North African country. The ERC's stated purpose was to establish the truth about human rights abuses perpetrated from the time of Morocco's independence in 1956 until 1999. The king named Benzekri to head the commission, an appointment that, because of Benzekri's forceful intellect and reputation for integrity, enhanced the credibility of the new body.

“Driss was always at the heart of efforts to address abuses past and present in Morocco,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Thanks in no small measure to his efforts, victims of past human rights abuses finally began to obtain redress and recognition decades after their torment.”

Some human rights activists criticized the Equity and Reconciliation Commission's statutory restrictions on bringing perpetrators to justice, saying that these would reinforce impunity for human rights abuses. Before the ERC was created, Benzekri observed: “The position one has on the impunity issues stems from one's assessment of where we are in democratization process,” implying that sceptics on reform were more likely to insist on punishing past abusers. Evidently, by the time he agreed to head the ERC, Benzekri believed that democratization had progressed to an extent that permitted the ERC to de-emphasize accountability for perpetrators.

Televised accounts a major success

In 2004 and 2005, Benzekri presided over the ERC's work of investigating thousands of cases of human

rights violations, deciding on individual and collective measures of compensation, and making recommendations to the government to consolidate the rule of law.

One of the major successes of the ERC was to organize public, televised testimonies by victims of past repression in cities around the country. The ERC's legacy is less certain with respect to its recommended reforms, most of which the government has yet to implement 18 months after they were proposed.

At the time of his death, Benzekri served as president of the king's Advisory Council of Human Rights. In January, he spoke at the World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Paris in favour of abolishing capital punishment in Morocco – one of the ERC recommendations that has yet to be implemented.

“Despite chronic back pain caused by torture and a debilitating illness, Driss continued to fight for human rights until the end of his life,” said Stork.

Like many other political activists arrested in the 1960s and 1970s, Benzekri was held in prolonged, illegal incommunicado detention before being convicted in an unfair trial for “harming state security.” He spent 18 months in the Derb Moulay Cherif interrogation center in Casablanca, where the police beat him while his hands and feet were tied behind his back. In 1977 he was transferred to Kenitra Prison, where he remained until the king freed him in 1991, 13 years before the end of his sentence.

In 1995, Human Rights Watch honoured Benzekri for his work as executive director of the Moroccan Human Rights Organization, at ceremonies in New York and Washington.

Human Rights Watch extends its condolences to Driss Benzekri's family, friends, and colleagues.

Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)