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# **Abraham Serfaty: Political activist who fell foul of the French colonial authorities as well as Morocco's authoritarian King Hassan II**

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Abraham Serfaty was a leading Moroccan Jewish dissident, who spent his life fighting for independence and democracy in his homeland, first against the French colonial rulers and then King Hassan II's absolute monarchy.

His struggle against all forms of injustice cost him 22 months in hiding, 17 years imprisonment and 13 years in exile, but he succeeded in returning to Morocco a free citizen.

Mohamed Moujahid, the Unified Socialist Party Secretary-General, hailed Serfaty as a man who "worked for the independence of Morocco, and made great sacrifices. He broke records in political detention in his endeavour to spread democracy and achieve social justice... He supported all those in their struggle against injustice and their fight for freedom... He was a true patriot."

Born in 1926 into a middle-class Moroccan-Jewish family originally from Tangier, Abraham Serfaty began his political education at an early age when in February 1944, like many young Moroccans, he joined the Communist Party. He soon found himself involved in fighting against French colonialism. The French Protectorate was established in 1912 with a Spanish Protectorate in the north of the country. Serfaty went to France to study and with his arrival in Paris, joined the French Communist Party. In 1949, he graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris, one of France's most prestigious mining engineering schools; following independence, he would help to develop technical education in Morocco.

In 1950, back in Morocco and the ranks of the Moroccan Communist Party, Serfaty continued the struggle against French oppression. However, in 1952 he was arrested and exiled to France under house arrest by the colonial authorities for his role as a nationalist activist. He returned home in 1956, when Morocco won independence.

Upon his return, he became a Special Adviser to the Minister of Economy (1957-60) and was a supporter of the new mining policy in the newly independent Morocco. From 1960 to 1968 he was Director of Research and Development at the Office Moroccan Phosphates. Serfaty was later removed from office for showing solidarity with a miners' strike.

From 1968 to 1972, he taught at the Mohammedia School of Engineering in Rabat, while concurrently collaborating with the writer (and editor) Abdellatif Laâbi on the anti-establishment magazine Souffles/Anfas. This was a magazine that became a conduit for a new generation of writers, artists, and intellectuals to stage a revolution against imperialist and colonial cultural domination.

Although Jewish, Serfaty was also an anti-Zionist Jew who recognised the State of Israel but who demanded the abolition of the so-called "Law of Return" and supported the creation of a Palestinian

State. By 1967 he no longer accepted Israeli nationalism and was outraged by the treatment of the Palestinians and supported their struggle. He remarked in his book *Prison Writings*, "Zionism is above all a racist ideology. It is the Jewish reversal of Hitlerism... It proclaims the state of Israel 'Jewish above everything', just as Hitler proclaimed an Aryan Germany".

In 1970, Serfaty left the Communist Party, which he now viewed as too doctrinaire and helped establish the Marxist-Leninist left-wing organisation, *Ila al-Amam* [Forward, or *En Avant* in French]. This move, however, was a source of concern to the authorities and the country's ruler King Hassan II. In January 1972 Serfaty was arrested by the security services and brutally tortured. Student demonstrations ensued, which eventually forced the authorities to release him. He was soon targeted again along with a friend, A Zeroual, who was also wanted by the authorities. Fearing arrest, the pair went into hiding in March 1972, helped by a French teacher, Christine Daure. Serfaty later married her in a Jewish ceremony at the Kenitra high security prison, where he was serving a life sentence.

After months in hiding, Serfaty and Zeroual were arrested again in 1974. Zeroual died in detention, believed to be a victim of torture. In October 1977 Serfaty, along with five other dissidents and anti-establishment figures, was put on trial in Casablanca, officially charged with "plotting against state security". All five were given life sentences. The consensus was that the severity of the sentence stemmed from Serfaty's stance against the annexation of the Western Sahara, although this was never mentioned in the official indictment.

In September 1991, following an international campaign led by Serfaty's wife and Danielle Mitterrand, wife of the French President François, Serfaty was released from Kenitra prison after 17 years. However, at the instigation of the Moroccan Interior Minister, Driss Basri, his Moroccan citizenship was immediately revoked and he and his wife were exiled to France, where he continued to write and criticise the Moroccan government. From 1992 to 1995 he taught at the University of Paris VIII (Department of Political Science) on Identity and Democracy in the Arab World.

With the death of his father in 1999, Mohammed VI became King of Morocco. A more forward thinking and reform-minded leader wanting to implement social reform, tackle corruption and human-rights abuses, he pardoned Serfaty and his citizenship was reinstated. In September 2000, Serfaty returned to his homeland, where he and his wife were given a villa and a modest income. He was later appointed advisor to the Moroccan National Office for Research and Oil (Onarep).

He never compromised his principles and continued to speak out in favour of freedom of the press. In December 2000 he called for the resignation of the Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssouffi.

## **Martin Childs**

Serfaty published six books over the years: *Anti-Zionist Struggle and Arab Revolution* (1977); *Prison Writings on Palestine* (1992); *In the King's Prisons* (1992); *The Other's Memory* (1993); *Morocco in Black and Grey* (1998); and *The Insubordinate: Jew, Moroccan and Rebel* (2001).

\* *Abraham Serfaty, political activist; born Casablanca, Morocco 1926; married Christine-Daure; died Marrakech 18 November 2010.*

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## **P.S.**

\* From *The Independent* (London), 3 December 2010

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/abraham-serfaty-political-activist-who-fell-foul-of-the-french-colonial-authorities-as-well-as-moroccos-authoritarian-king-hassan-ii-2149824.html>