

RSF 2021 Index: Journalism under constant pressure in North Africa

As a result of constant harassment of journalists and media in North Africa, three of the region's countries – Morocco, Algeria and Libya – continue to be coloured red or black on the World Press Freedom map because their situation is ranked as “bad” or “very bad” although their citizens haven't ceased to demand more press freedom and access to information since the 2011 Arab Spring.

The region's authorities constantly resort to judicial harassment of journalists, including arbitrary arrests, interminable provisional detention, repeated trials and trials that keep on being adjourned. In **Algeria** (146th), manipulation of the judicial system has been particularly blatant in the case of *Casbah Tribune* news website editor Khaled Drareni, who is also the correspondent of RSF and the French TV channel *TV5 Monde*. Because of his coverage of the “Hirak” anti-government protests, he was [sentenced on appeal](#) to two years in prison for “inciting an unauthorised demonstration” and “endangering state security.” He was finally freed under a presidential pardon after being held for 11 months but his judicial problems are not over: his case is to be retried in the autumn.

Drareni's case is not isolated. At least three other Algerian journalists have paid dearly for their reporting. Sofiane Merakchi, the correspondent of the Lebanese TV channel *Al-Mayadeen*, served an eight-month prison sentence after providing several foreign TV channels with video of a protest. Mustafa Bendjama, the editor of the Annaba-based regional daily *Le Provincial*, was interrogated more than 20 times in connection with his coverage of the Hirak protests and is the subject of three prosecutions because of his Facebook posts. And Ali Djamel Toubal, a correspondent for the privately-owned *Ennahar* media group, was sentenced to 15 months in prison, above all for posting video on social media showing police mistreating anti-government protesters. He was convicted under a law adopted in March 2020 that criminalises the spreading of fake news “endangering public order and state security.”

In neighbouring **Morocco** (down 3 at 136th), the authorities have been targeting four journalists critical of the government – Maâti Monjib, Omar Radi, Imad Stitou and Souleiman Raissouni –some of them for years. Accused of sex offences or threats to state security, charges unrelated to their journalistic work, their trial hearings are systematically postponed and their provisional release requests are usually refused. Radi and Raissouni, who have been in pre-trial detention for eight and 11 months respectively, have submitted no fewer than ten unsuccessful provisional release requests.

The victims of an iniquitous judicial system that clearly takes its orders from the government, these journalists have even had to put their own lives in danger by going on hunger strike in support of their right to due process. Raissouni announced on 8 April that he was no longer eating. Radi followed suit the next day. Monjib, who has Moroccan and French dual nationality, was released provisionally at the end of March after 19 days on hunger strike and three months in preventive detention.

Increasingly hostile environment

The environment is becoming increasingly fraught and even hostile for journalists and media throughout North Africa. Although much better ranked than its neighbours in recent years, even **Tunisia** (down 1 at 73rd) has fallen one place in the 2021 Index, above all because of a surge in hate speech against media fomented by far-right parliamentarians. Ever since his election as a parliamentary representative in 2019, Seifeddine Makhoulouf, the head of the Islamist and populist Al Karama coalition, has been attacking journalists verbally on social

media and in parliament, calling them “liars,” a “disgrace” and a “rabble trying to destroy the country and the revolution.”

Libya (down 1 at 165th) remains in the bottom tenth of the Index because the impunity enjoyed by press freedom’s predators for the past decade continues to obstruct journalism and because the armed conflict between east and west of the country has imposed a state of violence and fear that forces journalists to make a painful choice between self-censorship and propaganda for one or other of the two warring regimes.