

# MEDIA AS KEY WITNESSES AND POLITICAL PAWNS



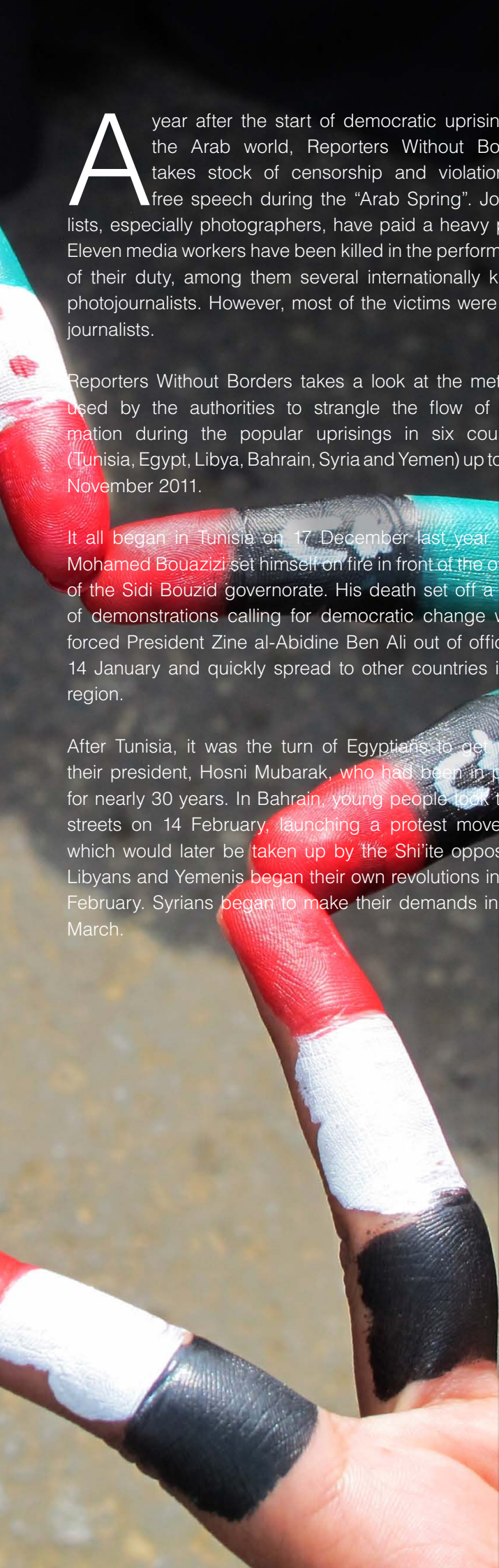
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# UPHEAVAL IN THE ARAB WORLD

## REPORT - NOVEMBER 2011

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR PRESS FREEDOM





A year after the start of democratic uprisings in the Arab world, Reporters Without Borders takes stock of censorship and violations of free speech during the “Arab Spring”. Journalists, especially photographers, have paid a heavy price. Eleven media workers have been killed in the performance of their duty, among them several internationally known photojournalists. However, most of the victims were local journalists.

Reporters Without Borders takes a look at the methods used by the authorities to strangle the flow of information during the popular uprisings in six countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen) up to mid-November 2011.

It all began in Tunisia on 17 December last year when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the offices of the Sidi Bouzid governorate. His death set off a wave of demonstrations calling for democratic change which forced President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali out of office on 14 January and quickly spread to other countries in the region.

After Tunisia, it was the turn of Egyptians to demand the removal of their president, Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for nearly 30 years. In Bahrain, young people took to the streets on 14 February, launching a protest movement which would later be taken up by the Shi’ite opposition. Libyans and Yemenis began their own revolutions in mid-February. Syrians began to make their demands in mid-March.

The Sultanate of Oman has also seen large-scale social protests. In Iraq, anti-corruption slogans are the theme of weekly demonstrations. The democratic aspirations of the people of Iraqi Kurdistan were violently suppressed in February. Even the Palestinians gathered in Gaza City’s Square of the Unknown Soldier to call for an end to the divisions between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem were the scenes of historic demonstrations urging the government to give priority to social programs over security policy. More recently, Kuwait and Jordan have also witnessed a wave of protests.

Fearing a knock-on effect, leaders of neighbouring Arab countries launched reforms. In Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced political changes on 15 April. In Morocco, King Mohammed adopted constitutional reforms approved in a referendum. Monarchs in the Gulf also made proposals to head off popular discontent.

The media played a critical role in these revolutions, reporting on the protests and their suppression, and maintaining momentum. In most cases new media such as Facebook and Twitter were used to spread information, as a substitute for a traditional press at the beck and call of the ruling powers. Despite the variability of its coverage, especially in Bahrain, *Al-Jazeera* played an important part in allowing opposition voices to be heard.

The main international media, when and where they were able to send in crews, had a mitigating effect on the crackdowns. In Egypt, *Al-Jazeera* and *CNN* provided real-time coverage of the clashes for an international audience. For this reason, the authorities in several countries sought to keep out such troublesome observers.

Ruling authorities have tried to impose total censorship, with media staff, bloggers and netizens bearing the cost of brutal and murderous repression. Every country developed its own ways of blocking or inhibiting the flow of information, such as Internet monitoring, cutting off access to the Internet and mobile phone networks, jamming satellite television stations, seizure of newspapers, assaults and arrests of media workers, bloggers and Internet users, kidnappings and murders, expulsions of foreign reporters, visa refusals, etc.

*Soazig Dollet with the participation of H  l  ne and Henri Middle East - Northern Africa desk*



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## #SIDIBOUZID

A young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set fire to himself in the town of Sidi Bouzid on 17 December last year, igniting a wave of popular anger against the security forces. The authorities imposed a total media blackout, physically attacking journalists who gave interviews to foreign media or who tried to get to the location. No news leaked out of the clashes disturbing this neglected area.

Since the traditional media were silent on the subject, Facebook and Twitter took over. Facebook, used by a quarter of the population, was able to feature comments, photos and videos of the disturbances. The rebellion in Sidi Bouzid could be followed from anywhere in the world and it quickly spread to neighbouring Kasserine and Thala. For three weeks, amateur videos from digital cameras were the only images available to Tunisians and the rest of the world. On Twitter, the hashtag #sidibouزيد was shared by Tunisian, Arab and Western users, a sign that support was spreading abroad.

Aware of the part played by Facebook, the authorities stepped up censorship and surveillance of the Internet in January, while the international media



THE FIGURES

were beginning to take an interest in Tunisia and were taking up images posted on the Web.

More than 100 pages on Facebook about what happened in Sidi Bouzid were blocked, as well as articles on the social unrest posted online by international news organizations. The Tunisian cyber police, nicknamed “Ammar 404” by Internet users, took steps to prevent the uploading of photos and videos to Facebook from Tunisia. It was the first time the social networking site had been censored. Other sites for sharing photos and videos, such as Flickr, YouTube, Dailymotion and Vimeo, have also been blocked for months. The police also hacked into Facebook accounts to obtain activists’ access details and infiltrate the citizen journalist networks that had grown up around the disturbances in Sidi Bouzid. Many email accounts were also hacked. Four bloggers, including Slim Amamou, were arrested on 6 January.

In response, a group of activist hackers known as Anonymous carried out a series of cyber-attacks, code-named “Operation Tunisia” on government websites.

## SINCE 14 JANUARY

Since 14 January the tone of the media has changed. Print media and television have started taking an interest in social topics, forbidden during the Ben Ali era. Even the official news agency *TAP* has tackled new subjects. However, most media staff have stayed in their jobs. Former supporters of Ben Ali’s government have turned into pioneers of change.

The information ministry disappeared from the structure of the interim national unity government, which took over on 17 January after Ben Ali fled. The blogger Slim Amamou, released from detention four days earlier, was appointed Secretary of State for youth and sport. The new government immediately proclaimed total freedom of information and expression as a basic principle of the new era.

Although there is a genuine tone of freedom, new taboos have emerged. Little attention is paid to violence by the police and the military, to cases of corruption implicating associates of the former president who are still in Tunisia, or to the difficulties faced by the present government.

Journalists covering demonstrations were violently assaulted by the security forces in May and July, as if the old methods had resurfaced... In addition, the former Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi issued a worrying statement in July blaming the press in part for the prevailing political and social instability.

The premises of the TV station *Nessma* were attacked and its staff and the manager threatened on 9 October, after the screening two days earlier of the Franco-Iranian animated film *Persepolis* by Marjane Sartrapi. The incident put the question of freedom of expression at the centre of the campaign for constituent assembly elections on 23 October.

Censorship of the Web made a slight reappearance in May. Some Facebook pages were filtered as part of an anti-pornography order issued by an examining magistrate of the Tunis military court. The Tunisian Internet Agency was ordered to install a censorship and filtering system. It announced it wanted to take the case to the country’s Supreme Court.

The election campaign was covered by publicly and privately owned radio and television stations dating from the Ben Ali era. Although 12 radio stations submitted licence applications to the Independent National Authority to Reform Information and Communication, it took the Essebsi government six months – until the final cabinet meeting on 15 October, just a week before the election – to grant them. It is now up to the constituent assembly, elected on 23 October, to carry through this reform process together with the government of Hamadi Jebali, leader of the *Ennahda* party, who has been appointed prime minister ■



# EGYPT

Encouraged by the Tunisian revolution, Egyptians took to the streets on National Police Day on 25 January. The authorities kept journalists away from the demonstrations. From early afternoon, they jammed mobile phone networks around the places where people gathered in Cairo. There was a strong international media presence since the start of the protests. Twitter was jammed later that day, as was the video streaming website Bambuser.com. The hash tag #jan25, referring to the first day of protests, was widely circulated on the social network. The next day, Facebook was inaccessible for part of the time. Slow connections were reported, especially when trying to access on-line newspapers such as *Al-Badil*, *Al-Dustour* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, which played a prominent role in coverage of the unrest. Egyptian authorities were swamped and cut Internet and mobile phone networks in the evening of 27 January. Only one small provider, Nour, was able to maintain Web access for a while.

Netizens, who took on much of the reporting on the demonstrations, were able to find numerous other means of dissemination. They managed to tweet from Tahrir Square, post videos on YouTube and connect to Bambuser. Abroad, Internet service providers suggested Egyptian users tried using a modem to connect to their networks. Google and Twitter joined in the battle against censorship by providing an application that converted voice messages into tweets.

Internet access was restored on 2 February, after five days. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Deve-

lopment estimates the outage cost the country 90 million dollars. Foreign journalists were the target of an extraordinary campaign of violence orchestrated by the military police on 2, 3 and 4 February. Thirty U.S. journalists, 18 French reporters and nine Poles among others were assaulted or questioned during the witch hunt. Almost no news organizations were spared. The most frequently targeted news organization was the television station *Al-Jazeera*. Three of its reporters were assaulted, four journalists were arrested and offices were destroyed.

## SINCE 11 FEBRUARY

A page of history was turned on 11 February when President Hosni Mubarak gave up power after 18 days of bloody crackdown. Nine months later, Egyptians are disillusioned. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, now running the country, has not kept its promises. Far from being lifted, the state of emergency in force since 1981 has been extended until June 2012.

The military, sacrosanct in Egypt, is using the same old methods of censorship and intimidation. The appointment of the Supreme Council after Mubarak's departure served only to strengthen the hallowed position of the armed forces. The Council not only retained Mubarak's methods of controlling the flow of information but made them even tougher. Numerous journalists and bloggers who tried to expose abuses by some

members of the armed forces and the military police during the pro-democracy uprising were prosecuted before military tribunals. The Supreme Council stated that it would “tolerate no insults directed against it”. The list of such cases continues to lengthen.

The most symbolic of these was that of the blogger Maikel Nabil Sanad, sentenced to three years’ imprisonment in April. The conviction made him Egypt’s first prisoner of conscience since the revolution. He was accused of insulting the armed forces, publishing false information and disturbing the peace for having published a report on his blog casting doubt on the army’s perceived neutrality during the demonstrations in January and February. The report said soldiers were involved in the arrest, detention and torture of demonstrators. He began a hunger strike on 23 August to draw attention to his detention. His appeal hearing was due to open on 4 October but was postponed until 11 October, then 18 October when the judge ordered him to be placed in a psychiatric hospital.

The blogger Asmaa Mahfouz, a recipient of the European Parliament’s annual winner of the Sakharov Prize, was also targeted. She was threatened with being put on trial before a military court in August for insulting the Supreme Council, but the case was dropped. A new complaint was lodged on 8 October by several officers accusing her of having insulted the Supreme Council and its members during demonstrations in support of Sanad on 3 and 4 October.

On 11 September, the Supreme council threatened to use emergency laws against all journalists who “threaten social peace”. The military began an operation to check the licences of 16 satellite TV stations. Officials of the culture ministry raided the offices of *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt*. They seized mobile broadcasting equipment. Three weeks later, a similar raid was carried out.

The armed forces showed they were still capable of violence. During clashes between Coptic Christian demonstrators in the Maspero district of Cairo on 9 and 10 October, troops stormed the offices of the television stations *Al-Hurra* and *Channel January 25*, while they were broadcasting reports of the disturbances. The soldiers halted programmes and threatened journalists. Troops also temporary cut off power supplies, telephone lines and Internet connections in the offices of *Al-Shorouq TV*. On 13 November, the Supreme Council ordered a 15-day extension of the detention of the blogger and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, in prison since 30 October for having failed

to answer charges of incitement to violence, vandalism and firearms theft during demonstrations in Maspero. He was indicted on 29 November by the High Court of National Security.

The government-controlled media launched a large-scale smear campaign against Egyptian NGOs that receive aid from the U.S. government. The campaign was aimed only at organizations that had been critical of the Supreme Council. It threatens the future of many human rights groups in Egypt.

Egypt’s revolution entered a new phase during the week preceding parliamentary elections on 28 November. Violent clashes pitted protesters demanding the resignation of the Supreme Council against security forces mainly in the streets around Tahrir Square. More than 40 instances of assaults and arrests of journalists by the security forces were recorded. The holding of the elections still divides public opinion ■





# LIBYA

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Inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya's insurgency began on 15 and 16 February 2011 in Benghazi. Tripoli fell to the rebels in late August, bringing an end to the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, who was killed on 20 October. The National Transitional Council, initially established in Benghazi and widely recognised internationally, is the new authority responsible for rebuilding the country.

The media paid a heavy price for its coverage of the fighting between pro-Gaddafi forces and the rebels. It is still difficult to estimate casualty numbers. Four foreign journalists were killed, including two eminent photojournalists and at least one Libyan reporter. There has been no word from three missing Libyan journalists.

## DURING THE UPRISING

Despite statements to the contrary, Gaddafi knew in February of the risks that the revolt would spread. As news of the fall of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt spread through Libya, calls for demonstrations were launched on Facebook. Access to social networking websites was severely disrupted subsequently.

The writer and political commentator Jamal Al-Hajji, who used the Internet to call for protests, was arrested on 1 February. The newspaper *Libya Al-Youm* reported that Taqi Al-Din Al-Chalawi, manager of the news site *Irasa*, and its editor Abdel Fattah Bourwaq were detained on 16 February. On the same day, the blogger Mohammed Al-Ashim Masmari was arrested after giving interviews to the Arabic service of the *BBC* and *Al-Jazeera*.

In the absence of the international media, Libyan citizens acted as journalists themselves. Using their mobile phones and cameras, they recorded images of the demonstrations and crackdowns. For several days, these amateur videos were the only images of the unrest that were available. The Libyan journalist and blogger Mohamed "Mo" Al-Nabous, who founded the Benghazi TV station *Libya Al-Hurra* in the early days of the uprising -- initially broadcasting online then by satellite -- was shot dead by a sniper on 19 March, a few hours before the military intervention by the coalition.

The government was able to disrupt the Web with the help of the main Internet service provider, owned by Gaddafi's son Mohamed. The network security firms Arbor Networks and Renesys reported that Internet access was cut several times from 18 February onwards.



All telephone connections, land line and mobile, were reported to have been cut off around 21 February, then subject to severe disruption. The signal from the Nilesat satellite, which carries the stations *Al-Hurra*, *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* among others, was jammed from 23 February. These stations had covered the unrest and broadcast eyewitness accounts by telephone.

At the same time, the government was trying to use new technology to get its message across and rally its supporters. Text messages were sent out to discourage people from taking part in the demonstrations.

Gaddafi announced that journalists who had entered the country without permission and were in the rebel-controlled zone were considered to be accomplices of Al-Qaeda and liable to arrest at any time. As a result, 32 journalists were detained by pro-Gaddafi forces in the east of the country and transferred to prison in Tripoli.

At the same time, the authorities invited hundreds of foreign journalists to come and “cover what was happening in Tripoli”. While publicly denying it, officials deployed an array of measures aimed at preventing them from doing their job freely, such as verbal and physical threats, bans on deviating from organized tours, violence and interrogation. Journalists were allowed to film only groups that supported the government. Their movements had to be ratified by the authorities. Several were interrogated when they tried to go to certain locations without prior permission. In early March, the authorities banned foreign journalists in Tripoli from leaving their hotels without permission. A similar scenario occurred in late August when Tripoli was captured by the rebels. At the same time, several journalists were “invited to leave the country”. Finally, Libyans who spoke to the foreign media ran the risk of attacks by pro-Gaddafi forces.

Reporters Without Borders considers that these abuses, taken together, amount to war crimes under Article 8 of the statutes of the International Criminal Court. It has asked the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya to investigate these matters.

It is also important to mention the air strike by NATO forces on 30 July against the headquarters of the Libyan national broadcaster *Al-Jamahiriya* in Tripoli, which destroyed three satellite dishes. The station said three journalists were



killed and 21 injured in the raid. We have been unable to corroborate this information. NATO said its action was intended to silence the station’s “messages of terror”. The attack was criticized by Reporters Without Borders.

## SINCE THE UPRISING

Since the uprising began in Benghazi, new media outlets have opened in the “liberated” zone of the country the first being the newspaper 17 February. In six months their numbers have exploded. By the end of July, more than 130 printed publications had been registered with the National Transitional Council, many radio and satellite TV stations had been set up. We are witnessing genuine freedom of expression and public space is gradually being filled up.

What does Libya’s political future hold? When will a new constitution be drawn up? The task facing the NTC is huge. It is difficult to imagine how the media will look in the Libya of the future, which is going to need international support ■



# BAHRAIN

Since 14 February

- 1 @ Netizen killed
- 1 Newspaper founder killed
- 36 Journalists imprisoned / interrogated
- 31 Journalists assaulted
- 40 Forced resignations
- 6 Journalists expelled

THE FIGURES

The pro-democracy protest movement reached Bahrain in mid-February 2011. The authorities in this small country, which has a population of barely 1.2 million, used a formidable arsenal of harsh measures as they struggled to control the flow of information about the demonstrations and the crackdown by the security forces. These included the interrogation and expulsion of foreign journalists, who found themselves having severe difficulty obtaining visas, threats against those willing to be interviewed by foreign media, harassment of free speech campaigners, arrests of photographers, bloggers and netizens (one of whom died in custody), legal proceedings against free speech activists, etc. At the same time, a propaganda campaign was launched against the main figures in the protest movement, branding them as traitors or terrorists.

## BAHRAINI JOURNALISTS THE MAIN VICTIMS

More than 30 Bahraini journalists were arrested, some held for a few hours, other for weeks. Naziha Saeed, a journalist who works for *Radio Monte-Carlo* and *France 24*, was summoned on 22 May. She was interrogated for nearly 12 hours and tortured. Sports journalist Faysal Hayyat, held in custody from April until June, was also reported to have been tortured.

The dismissal of media workers was part of the repressive policies carried out by the authorities. According to a report by the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, more than 40 journalists have been fired or forced to resign since the protests began.

## PHOTOGRAPHERS ALSO SINGLED OUT

From March onwards, many journalists were arrested and prosecuted. The trial opened in October of several members Bahrain Society of Photography. Its president Mohamed Salman Al-Sheikh was held in custody from 11 May until 2 July. A state of emergency imposed on 15 March was lifted on 12 June. A national dialogue opened by the authorities at the beginning of July eased tension but did not bring an end to prosecutions as a whole.

## HATE CAMPAIGN AGAINST AL-WASAT

The government media relayed hate messages against the daily *Al-Wasat*, the country's only opposition newspaper and a major target of the government's campaign against the media. Armed men raided the newspaper's printing plant on 15 March. Karim Fakhrawi, a founder of the newspaper and a member of its board, died in custody on 12 April, a week after he was arrested. The exact cause of his death has yet to be disclosed. The newspaper was closed for one day in early April and its management team forced to resign. They were prosecuted before the

kingdom’s Superior Criminal Court charged with “serious abuses” for disseminating false and misleading information that undermined the image and reputation of the country abroad. The editor, Mansour Al-Jamari, was forced to resign but was reinstated a few days later by the board. He admitted publishing six dubious articles but said he suspected the newspaper was set up. He was ordered to pay a fine.

## **BLOGGERS, WEBSITES AND OPPOSITION TV ALSO TARGETED**

The netizen Zakariya Rashid Hassan died in detention on 9 April probably after having been tortured, seven days after he was arrested on charges of inciting hatred, disseminating false news, promoting sectarianism and calling for the regime’s overthrow in online forums. His crime? He moderated an online discussion forum.

Twenty-one human rights activists and opposition members received long prison sentences from a military court on 22 June, at the end of a mass trial meant to serve as an example and give a strong message. Among them was the blogger Abduljalil Al-Singace, head of the Al-Haq movement’s human rights office. who was arrested on 16 March, On his blog he had drawn attention to human rights abuses against Shi’ites and the lamentable state of public freedoms in his country. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Ali Abdulemam, a well-known blogger considered an Internet pioneer in his country, was sentenced in absentia to 15 years’ imprisonment. The sentences were upheld by a special court on appeal. In early September, several detainees began a hunger strike to draw attention to their imprisonment and the increase in arbitrary arrests and unfair trials.

Between June and September, the authorities blocked a certain number of websites such as PalTalk, an audio and video chat group whose Bahrain Nation chat room has been used by members of the opposition to communicate with each other, [the site Bahrain Mirror](#) which criticizes the government, the website of the Bahrain Justice and Development and Movement, founded in July this year, which highlights human rights violations in Bahrain and advocates democratic reform, and [Twitcam](#) which allows real-time streaming on Twitter.

The satellite TV station *Lualua TV*, launched on 17 July by members of the Bahraini opposition in London after failing to get permission to broadcast from Manama, has been

jammed since it began broadcasting. Live streaming via the Internet is not available in Bahrain.

## **ATTACKS ON FOREIGN JOURNALISTS EXTEND MEDIA BLACKOUT**

Authorities in the kingdom have done everything they can to restrict international coverage of the unrest. Several journalists had their visa applications rejected, others were turned back on their arrival. Many were given only 48-hour visas. Once in the country, all journalists had to be accompanied by a team from the information ministry which curtailed their movements and restricted the subjects they could cover. Several were threatened, or even assaulted. Among the most serious incidents was when snipers fired from a helicopter on the *New York Times* reporter Michael Slackman and cameraman Sean Patrick Farrell as they were covering the clashes in Manama’s Pearl Square on 18 February. A crew from the *CNN* was forcibly detained and threatened on 29 March.

In June several foreign correspondents were forced to leave the country, such as Frederik Richter, *Reuters* correspondent in Bahrain since 2008, and the Irish journalist and writer Finian Cunningham, who had lived there for years. In mid-June the authorities announced they planned to bring proceedings against Robert Fisk, the Middle East correspondent of the British newspaper *The Independent*, accusing him of conducting a “defamatory and premeditated media campaign” against Bahrain and for alleged bias and unprofessionalism in his coverage of events. Mattar Ibrahim Mattar, a member of parliament for the Al-Wefaq party, was arrested on 2 May and held until 7 August as a result of an interview he gave to *Al-Jazeera* in which he warned of the possible arrest of opposition leaders.

Cherif Bassiouni, the head of an independent commission of inquiry set up by royal decree in June, said in his report published on 23 November that Bahraini security forces used excessive force when they tried to put down the popular uprising in March. He also acknowledged the use of torture against detainees.

King Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa subsequently announced the formation of a national commission to implement the inquiry’s recommendations ■



# SYRIA

Taking the lead from their Tunisian and Egyptian neighbours, Syrians started demonstrating in March 2011 to call for democratic change. The government of President Bashar Al-Assad responded with force to the protest movement, which had tentative beginnings. More than 15,000 people were reported to have been arrested, among them numerous journalists and bloggers.

The use of torture became systematic. As the weeks passed, the authorities strengthened their control over the means of communication, granting visas to the foreign press at their discretion and giving the cyber-army an increasingly important role in monitoring the Web. They waged a genuine disinformation battle, using pro-Assad propaganda, disseminating false information, hacking email and social networking accounts, phishing etc. In order to impose a blackout on the protests, the security forces prevented media workers from attending demonstrations. On March 25, the media were banned from entering the town of Deraa, a hotbed of protest, and forced to return to Damascus under escort by the security forces. The government regularly cut mobile phone and Internet service in places where demonstrations were taking place to prevent them being publicized and to restrict the transmission of video images. Media organizations and NGOs found a way round this by giving satellite telephones to residents in towns that were difficult to reach or subject to frequent cuts in communications. This solution was not without danger. Border checks were stepped up and these days it is difficult to take such equipment into the country.

About 25 are currently behind bars. Among them are Ahmed Bilal, a producer for TV station *Falesteen* held for questioning on 13 September, Amer Matar, a journalist with the daily *Al-Hayat* detained since 4 September, and the

blogger Jihad Jamal, known by the blog name of "Milan", who was arrested on 14 October for the third time since March, and the documentary filmmaker Nidal Hassan, who was kidnapped in Damascus on 3 November. We fear that they, and others, may meet the same fate as Ghiyath Matar, a peace campaigner arrested on 6 September who died in custody six days later after being tortured.

Physical assaults are a daily occurrence. Members of the security forces abducted the cartoonist Ali Ferzat on 25 August in Omeyyades Square in the centre of Damascus. They beat him up, burned his body with cigarettes and took special care to break his left hand, the one he uses for drawing. He was released after several hours on the road to the airport with a bag over his head.

Many journalists and bloggers fled the country, seeking refuge in Turkey or Lebanon. The Lebanese government has co-operated with the Damascus government in hunting down Syrians who spread news about the crackdown.

## THE FOREIGN PRESS

The authorities managed to drive the foreign press out of the country, arresting or expelling some correspondents as soon as the protests started, rejecting visa applications and subsequently severely restricting foreign journalists' access to the country. The correspondents of the *Associated Press* and *Reuters* news agencies were arrested and thrown out as soon as the uprising began. Khaled Ya'qoub Oweis, *Reuters'* Damascus correspondent, had his accreditation withdrawn on 25 March.

*Al Jazeera* announced on April 27 that it was suspending all activities in Syria indefinitely as a result of the many

threats received by its crews. Three days later about 100 people gathered outside the Damascus offices of the station, which was accused of broadcasting lies and exaggeration in its coverage of the protests. Its premises were vandalized.

Syrians and foreigners living in the country were fearful of speaking to the media. Anyone who had contact with the foreign media often paid a high price for doing so. Omar Al-Assad, who had been working for several publications including the dailies *As-Safir* and *Al-Hayat* and the satellite TV station *Al-Jazeera* since the start of the protests, was arrested on 3 July. He was released on 30 November. Other Syrian citizens, defying the fear of reprisals, have been or are still imprisoned and being tortured for contact with, or support for, foreign journalists. The list grows longer by the day. In the absence of foreign journalists, it became impossible to find out precisely what was going on in Syria. The media blackout imposed by the authorities gave free rein to rumour.

## INTERNET MONITORING AND THE CYBER ARMY

Internet service slows down on almost every Friday, when the main weekly demonstration takes place. This often lasts for a considerable time to prevent videos shot during the rallies from being uploaded or transmitted. The cyber-army responsible for monitoring cyber-dissidents on social networking sites, appears to have stepped up its activities since the end of June. Its members flood sites and Web pages that support the demonstrations with pro-Assad messages. Twitter accounts have been set up to interfere with the hash tag #Syria by sending hundreds of tweets whose keywords are linked to sports results or photos of the country.

It also seeks to discredit the popular uprising by posting appeals for violence on the pages of government opponents, pretending that activists are behind them. As a means of monitoring dissidents, the authorities obtain personal details using phishing techniques, such as setting up false Facebook pages, or an invitation to follow a Twitter link to see a video. The unsuspecting user then enters an email address and password. Transmissions of the privately owned TV station *Orient TV*, which broadcasts from the United Arab emirates, have been cut several times on the Nilesat and Arabsat satellites.

## HOW PROPAGANDA IS USED IN THE MEDIA

The government uses the media to spread its propaganda [based on three principles](#). The first is to praise Assad and his government. The second is to try to discredit the foreign media, accusing it of lying about the country and of taking the insurgents' side. "When the demonstrations began in Syria in March, no-one dared to watch *Al-Jazeera* in public for fear of being branded 'mundiss' (infiltrator or plotter), a term used by government supporters to describe dissidents," [said a French student](#) who returned home at the end of August after studying Arabic in Damascus. Finally, the official discourse points to a conspiracy theory. At first, Assad spoke of an Israeli plot, before raising the Salafist threat as being behind the protest movement. This media strategy "deludes few people outside the country but plays on the Syrians' fears of communal violence", according to Barah Mikhail, senior researcher on Middle Eastern issues at the FRIDE think tank. The government raises the spectre of conflict between communities, using loyalist media outlets to spread rumours in multi-denominational towns to try to set communities against each other.

Assad has announced large-scale reforms to try to satisfy the mob. On 28 October he issued a decree on the media, which without irony called for "respect for the fundamental freedoms contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in international conventions". Yet a bloody crackdown has been under way for almost six months. The decree's article 11 stipulates that "any attack on a journalist will be treated as an attack on a Syrian government official". Who are Syria's rulers trying to convince? The international community? Their own public?

However, this has fooled no-one. The international commission of inquiry on Syria states clearly in its report published on 28 November that Syrian security forces have committed and continue to commit crimes against humanity in several regions of the country. ■





# YEMEN

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Since 17 february

3 Journalists killed

9 Assassination attempts

14 Journalists kidnapped

18 Journalists imprisoned / questioned

72 Journalists assaulted

14 Media organizations censored

24 Media organizations attacked

25 Newspapers seized

10 Expulsions

THE FIGURES

The protest movement began in Yemen on 11 February when people took to the streets of Sanaa to celebrate the fall of Egypt's President, Hosni Mubarak, and to call on their own government to resign. Several journalists were attacked on the sidelines of the marches, camcorders were seized and destroyed, memory cards wiped. President Ali Abdallah Saleh toughened existing measures to prevent the publication of images of the crackdown and to impose total

editorial censorship. It was the start of a policy of systematic attacks on media workers.

All means were regarded as fair game to intimidate journalists. Telephone threats and physical attacks take place daily. Pro-government militiamen, known as *baltajiyas*, carry out punitive expeditions in the streets.

Since the protests began, three journalists have been killed by sniper fire while reporting on the demonstrations: Hassan Al-Wadhaf, a cameraman with *Al-Hurra TV*, Jamal Al-Sharabi, a photographer for the independent daily *Al-Masdar* and Abd Al-Ghani Al-bureihi of *Yemeniya TV*. Three other journalists have been killed since February by shellfire or while they were attending demonstrations.

Arrests are commonplace and last from a few hours to several days. They target not only independent journalists but also senior figures of the official press who support the protests. This was the case with Abdelghani Al-Shamiri, the former news director of the state-owned radio and TV service who rallied to the protesters' cause. He was abducted in Sanaa on 31 March by agents of the national security service. He was released the next day as a result of pressure by the journalists' union.

More recently, assassination attempts have increased. A dozen journalists, several from national TV, have been targeted while they were reporting on opposition rallies. For example, Yasser Al-Mou'alimi, a presenter on the government satellite TV station *Yemeniya* who had expressed

support for the protest movement, escaped an attempt on his life. Television journalist Abdel Majid Al-Samawi was shot and wounded by a sniper on 23 September. He died 10 days later.

## NEWSPAPERS SEIZED, WEBSITES BLOCKED

The independent and opposition press has a strong presence in Yemen, which explains why the authorities have tried to cut off distribution networks and to seize some newspapers. Numerous titles that are independent or affiliated to the opposition, such as *Al-Omana'* et *Al-Thawry*, *Al-Ahali*, *Akhbar Al-Youm*, *Al-Oula*, *Al-Nass*, *Al-Sharia*, *Al-Qadiya*, *Al-Yaqeen*, *Al-Tajamou'*, *Hadith Al-Madina*, *Al-Nidaa*, etc., are regularly seized by the Republican Guard at checkpoints, such as those on the route into the southern provinces of Taiz and Ibb. The distributors are routinely assaulted, the newspapers' premises ransacked and equipment seized. The headquarters of the independent weekly *Al-Nada'* and the offices of the independent daily *Al-Adhwaa* in Sanaa were attacked a month apart, one in June and the other in July. In May, it was the turn of the TV station *Suhail TV* and the independent daily *Al-Oula*.

The authorities also block the online editions of newspaper or independent news sites such as the *YemenOnline daily*, *Aden Online*, *Al-Masdar Online*, *Mareb Press*, *Al-Sahwa Net*. Even access to the website of the state news agency Saba has been blocked.

Yemeni authorities have made the telephone application Skype inaccessible since February, after they realized that many opposition figures and journalist used it to give interviews.

## THE FOREIGN PRESS

In March, the TV station *Al-Jazeera* closed its offices after encountering a series of difficulties such as the withdrawal of the accreditation for all its journalists, and an assault on a cameraman, an attack on its office, the looting of transmission equipment etc. Two of its correspondents were expelled on 19 March.

Some foreign journalists are still able to carry out their work in Yemen but many have been expelled or turned back at

the airport. No more visas are being granted. *New York Times* reporter Robert Worth was refused entry by Yemeni authorities on 25 March. A few days earlier, six British and American journalists who lived in Yemen and worked regularly for international news organizations such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*, were expelled. The U.S. journalist Patrick Symmes, who writes for the magazines *Outside* and *GQ*, and his Italian photographer Marco Di Lauro suffered the same fate when they returned to Sanaa from a reporting assignment on the Yemeni island of Socotra.

## TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

Journalists are faced with prolonged and frequent power cuts. For several months now, electricity has not been available to the people for more than one hour a day. Without it, communication is impossible except for those who own their own generator. However, diesel fuel is scarce as a result of a shortage engineered by the government. This has led to severe communication difficulties throughout the country. The authorities arbitrarily closed down the opposition-controlled mobile phone company SabaFon.

In the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on 23 November, President Saleh signed a transition agreement drafted by the Gulf Co-operation Council. Under the pact, he has handed over power to his vice-president, Abd- Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, who will be responsible for forming a new government in agreement with the opposition, and for organizing presidential elections within three months.

However, the accord also provides immunity from prosecution for the Yemeni leader for crimes he is alleged to have committed. Saleh, injured in an assassination attempt five months ago, will be allowed to go to the United States for medical treatment. He already underwent treatment in Saudi Arabia between June and October.

The handover deal has been disputed by demonstrators in the streets.

For now, it is difficult to foresee how Yemen's media will evolve. The authorities responsible for carrying out democratic reforms must ensure that adherence to basic freedoms, including freedom of the press, is a cornerstone of the new government ■

# **REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS**

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