

MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA



ARAB UPRISINGS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE PRESS FREEDOM INDEX

The Arab uprisings and the measures taken by governments to control news and information in response to the uprisings had a major impact on the ranking of countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa. From Morocco to Bahrain and Yemen, few countries were spared by this wave of pro-democracy uprisings, which prompted major crackdowns.

Some predators of press freedom fell from power, but others remain in place. The transitions that have begun are not necessarily leading towards more pluralism and most of the changes in the rankings have been downward ones. The freedoms that have been won are fragile and could easily be swept away.

Countries where revolts led to political change

Tunisia rose in the index, from 164th to 134th, because of the end of the harassment of journalists by the Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali regime, the emergence of real pluralism of opinion in the print media and, albeit possibly only for the time being, the end of massive and systematic Internet filtering. The recent appointments of persons with links to the old regime to run the state-owned media underscored the danger of a return to the past.

Libya has also risen in the index, but to a lesser degree, going from 160th to 154th. After the Libyan uprising began in February, there was an explosion in the number of media, above all in the east of the country. The new pluralist enthusiasm spread to the west after the liberation of Tripoli at the end of August. Newspapers and radio and TV stations have sprouted like mus-

hrooms. But Libya's ranking reflects the many abuses against journalists during the civil war. If democratization continues and if media pluralism and independence take a lasting hold, Libya's ranking will improve over the next few years.

Countries where repression continues and changes are just cosmetic

Most of the region's countries have fallen in the index because of the measures taken in a bid to impose a news blackout on a crackdown. **Egypt** plummeted 39 places (from 127th last year to 166th this year) because of the attempts by Hosni Mubarak's government and then the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to rein in the revolution's successive phases. The hounding of foreign journalists for three days at the start of February, the interrogations, arrests and convictions of journalists and bloggers by military courts, and the searches without warrants all contributed to Egypt's dramatic fall in the index.

The **Kingdom of Bahrain** (173rd) plunged 29 places to become one of the world's 10 most repressive countries. Bahraini and foreign journalists were systematically hounded from February onwards. An entire arsenal of measures were taken to prevent information circulating about the evolving situation in the country. At the same time, the authorities made extensive use of the media to put out pro-government propaganda. The creation of an independent commission of enquiry did not end the abuses against journalists. It just helped to ensure that, as a result of the undertakings given by the

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authorities, the rest of the world stopped talking about Bahrain.

Yemen fell just one place (from 170th to 171st) despite all the violence used by the security forces against demonstrators and journalists covering the demonstrations. But the media freedom situation was already very worrying and Yemen had already fallen 16 places since 2008, when a sharp deterioration began. A Gulf Cooperation Council plan under which President Ali Abdallah Saleh was supposed to stand down, which he signed on 23 November, did not change the internal situation, far from it.

Syria, which had already attained a very low ranking in recent years, fell a bit more, from 173rd to 176th place, on the brink of become one of the bottom three. The situation in Syria had an impact on neighbouring Lebanon, where the government provided the Syrian authorities with a degree of cooperation in their attempts to track down dissident Syrian journalists and bloggers who had fled to Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia fell only one place (from 157th to 158th) although the government organized a news blackout on the demonstrations and ensuing crackdown in the eastern regions with a Shiite majority. But Saudi Arabia had already been very low in the index because of the lack of pluralism and high level of self-censorship.

Countries that relapsed

After rising in the index for several years in a row, **Iraq** fell 22 places this year, from 130th to 152nd (almost to the position it held in 2008, when it was 158th). There were various reasons. The first was an increase in murders of journalists. Hadi Al-Mahdi's murder on 8 September marked a clear turning point. Another reason was the fact that journalists are very often the target of violence by the security forces, whether at demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Baghdad, or in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region that had for many years offered a refuge for journalists.

As regards its internal situation, **Israel** fell six places (from 86th to 92nd) for two reasons. Firstly, Haaretz reporter Uri Blau is facing a possible seven-year jail sentence for possessing classified documents and his source, Anat Kam, was

sentenced to three years in prison on 31 October. Secondly, on 21 November, parliament approved a media bill on first reading that would drastically increase the amount of damages that can be awarded in defamation cases. In general, although Israel enjoys real media pluralism, it is not in the top 50 countries in the Reporters Without Borders index because the media are subject to prior military censorship.

The **Palestinian Territories** fell three places because of attacks on journalists during demonstrations by Palestinians calling for an end to the war between Fatah and Hamas, and because of an illegal takeover by Hamas supporters of the journalists' union in Gaza City.

Countries that fell again

The **United Arab Emirates** fell again, this time from 87th to 112th, above all because of its Internet filtering policy and the imprisonment of Ahmed Mansoor, a blogger who administers the online pro-democracy forum Al-Hewar ("The Dialogue"), from 8 April to 28 November along with four other activists, known collectively as "The UAE 5." He was reportedly mistreated while detained and his family was repeatedly threatened.

The media freedom situation has not changed intrinsically in **Jordan** but police violence against journalists and repeated deliberate attacks on the Agence France-Presse bureau in Amman caused it to fall eight places in the index, from 120^h to 128^h.

Morocco fell again, this time from 135th to 138th, as a result of Al-Massae editor Rachid Nini's imprisonment. He is still detained.

Algeria, on the other hand, rose again, this time 11 places, from 133rd to 122nd, above all because of a fall in the number of trials of journalists.