



RSF 2020 Index: Environment worsens for North Africa's journalists

What with interminable trials in Morocco, frequent arrests and prolonged pre-trial detention in Algeria and media outlets pressganged into serving belligerents in Libya, the environment for journalists has continued to worsen in North Africa – except Tunisia, which continues its democratic transition despite delays with reforming its media legislation.

In Algeria (146th), whose five-place fall is the region's biggest, journalists have been sorely tested ever since the wave of "Hirak" street protests began in February 2019. Cases of journalists being detained and intimidated by the security services became more frequent as the protests continued, and didn't stop when the coronavirus epidemic ended the protests. On the contrary, Casbah Tribune website editor Khaled Drareni, who is also the Algeria correspondent of RSF and TV5 Monde, was arrested on 29 March near Blida, a region that was supposed to be under lockdown because it is the epidemic's epicentre in Algeria, and he is now facing a possible ten-year jail sentence on a charge of "inciting an unarmed gathering and endangering national unity." Sofiane Merakchi, the correspondent of the Lebanese TV channel Al Mayadeen and a reporter for France 24 et RT, was the first journalist to be detained in connection with his coverage of the protest movement. Arrested in late September 2019 on a charge of importing equipment without a permit and evading customs duties, he was sentenced to eight months in prison.

Morocco (133rd) has risen two places in the 2020 Index, above all because of the creation of a Press Council, even if it has not as yet helped to make the environment for media and journalists any less threatening. Judicial harassment continues. In addition to the trials of a number of media figures that have dragged on for several years, several new prosecutions have been initiated and heavy sentences have been passed. Taoufik Bouachrine, a columnist and editor of the Arabic-language newspaper Akhbar al-Yaoum, was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a fine of 255,000 euros on rape charges that he denied, insisting that he was the victim of a "political trial." Journalist and human rights defender Omar Radi was given a four-month suspended prison sentence for a single tweet criticizing a judicial decision.

Media forced to work for belligerents

Libya (164th) has continued its slide down the Index, falling another two places. Crimes of violence against journalists by press freedom predators have gone completely unpunished for the past nine years, while the war between rival regimes in the east and west of the country has resulted in an appalling climate of threats and violence for the media. Forced to censor themselves or flee abroad since the fighting began in 2014, Libya's journalists and media outlets now find themselves being pressganged into working for one or other of the warring factions.

Against this rather sombre regional backdrop, Tunisia is still the best ranked country by far and has held on to its 72nd place. Continuing its democratic transition, it has created the basis for a

free, independent and professional media sector. Nonetheless, the drafting of new media legislation has dragged on for years and the climate for the media and journalists has worsened notably since the election of a new president in October 2019.