

RSF 2021 Index: Covid makes African journalism more vulnerable than ever

With reporters attacked and arrested, their incomes falling and media undermined by disinformation and draconian laws, the coronavirus pandemic has compounded the huge difficulties for journalism in sub-Saharan Africa, where 23 of the 48 countries (two more than in 2020) are now marked as red or black on the World Press Freedom map, meaning the situation is classified as bad or very bad.

The coronavirus crisis has [made it evident](#) that African journalists' role in nurturing democracies built on fact-based and pluralist public debate is still far from assured. Instead of allowing journalists to do their job of reporting the news, a role that is more essential than ever during such a crisis, authorities sought to control coverage of the pandemic and often facilitated or even directly contributed to hostility and mistrust towards those trying to provide objective, researched reporting.

Journalism, Covid-19's collateral victim

RSF registered three times as many arrests and [attacks](#) on journalists in sub-Saharan Africa between 15 March and 15 May 2020 as it did during the same period in 2019. Many countries, including the continent's most advanced democracies, resorted to force and legislation to prevent journalists from working. While reporting on lockdown measures, one journalist ended up with a [broken leg](#) in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** (down 1 at 149th), a woman reporter was [hit by rubber bullets](#) in **South Africa** (down 1 at 32nd) and a WebTV director spend 11 months in prison in **Rwanda** (down 1 at 156th) before finally being released in March 2021.

This surge in abuses served as a reminder that African journalists are only too often regarded as enemies to be controlled or suppressed, rather than allies who can help address contemporary challenges and crises. The marked increase in abuses is reflected in a 13% deterioration in the Index's violations indicator for the region in the past year and is one of the reasons why Africa remains the world's most dangerous continent for journalists in 2021, according to RSF analysis.

Acknowledgment of the key role investigative journalism plays in supporting democratic societies, including these societies' abilities to deal with crises, is also still very limited across the continent. In 2020, journalists were sent to prison for revealing compromising information about the authorities' management of the pandemic. This was the case in **Zimbabwe** (down 4 at 130th) for Hopewell Chin'ono, an investigative reporter who was [arrested](#) after helping to expose overbilling by a company supplying medical equipment to combat Covid-19. In **Comoros** (down 9 at 84th), newspaper reporter Andjouza Abouheir was [threatened](#) with prosecution after she revealed that the country had reported no coronavirus cases because samples taken from persons suspected of being infected had not been sent for analysis.

On the whole, the pandemic helped undermine journalists' independence and efforts to ensure governments carried out decisions based on facts. In **Tanzania** (unchanged at 124th), coverage of the impact of the coronavirus crisis was almost [impossible](#) because of the authorities' denial of the facts (see box). The country refused to order vaccines, as did **Burundi** (up 13 at 147th), whose president, Pierre Nkurunziza, died a few weeks after his wife contracted Covid-19. Several countries, including South Africa, **Botswana** (up 1 at 38th) and **Eswatini** (141st), also criminalised the dissemination of "false information" about the virus, punishing violators with prison sentences.

Tanzania (124th)

Pandemic information blackout

Did John Magufuli die from Covid-19, as some East African media suspect? Tanzania's president, who died suddenly in March 2021, may have paid the ultimate price for refusing to believe the facts. He called the virus a "western conspiracy". He suggested that Tanzania had kept it at bay "by force of prayer". An all-out press freedom predator ever since he became president in 2015, Magufuli used the same repressive methods on the pandemic as he did with other subjects he wanted hushed up, organising a total [information blackout](#). The authorities have provided no epidemiological data since April 2020. Journalists and media outlets trying to cover the story have been threatened, arrested or suspended. Under new [regulations](#), publishing unapproved information about an "outbreak of a deadly or contagious disease" or reproducing content from foreign media without prior permission became punishable by imprisonment.

Journalists treated as cyber-criminals

Like elsewhere in the world, African countries have suffered damage because of the glaring lack of transparency and effectiveness of moderation policies pursued by leading online platforms with regard to disinformation. Worse still, platforms have sometimes been guilty of [censoring](#) journalists. Twitter suspended the accounts of *The Continent*, one of the most respected South African weeklies, along with the accounts of at least four journalists, for referring to Bill Gates's opposition to removing patents on Covid-19 vaccines, or for referring to Twitter's decision to block *The Continent's* account. By acting as apprentice information regulators while lacking the required legitimacy and without appropriate democratic safeguards, major platforms pose a danger to the freedom to inform.

African governments' responses to these challenges have not offered more safeguards either – far from it. New regulations adopted hastily in recent years with the declared aim of combatting "infodemics" have been used to silence journalists. In **Benin** (down 1 at 114th), amendments to the "[Digital Code](#)" are clearly needed after it was used to sentence investigative reporter Ignace Sossou to six months in prison for accurately tweeting comments made by a public prosecutor. A new [cyber-crime law](#) in **Niger** (down 2 at 59th) led to a blogger's arrest, while in **Senegal** (down 2 at 49th), the press law now gradually taking effect maintains [criminal penalties](#) of up to two years in prison for defamation. This is very disturbing, especially as neither the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (DRC) nor [Somalia](#) (up 2 at 161st) nor any other African country complied with RSF's calls to decriminalise press offences in 2020. A quarter of the arbitrary detentions of journalists registered by RSF in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 took place in these two countries.

Hopes from changes in government dashed

The lack of progress with long-awaited legislative reforms in [Gambia](#) (up 2 at 85th), **Zimbabwe**, [Sudan](#) (159th), [Angola](#) (up 3 at 103rd) and the DRC reflects a disturbing sluggishness in countries that have seen recent changes of governments or the removal of autocrats notorious both for their longevity and predatory treatment of the press. They include **Ethiopia** (down 2 at 101st), which fell in the Index for the first time since Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in 2018. Although the Ethiopian authorities launched a "fact-checking" initiative that was central to their relations with the media, journalists have long been prevented from visiting the country's conflict zones. Some have been [threatened](#). Others have been [arrested](#).

Journalism is still dangerous in Africa, especially when journalists cover elections or social unrest. In **Uganda** (125th), the reelection of Yoweri Museveni, the country's president for the past 35 years, was accompanied by a massive surge in [abuses](#) against journalists, while in

the **Republic of Congo** (118th), Denis Sassou Nguesso began his fourth consecutive term as president with a journalist [arbitrarily held](#) in one of his country's jails. **Nigeria** (down 5 at 120th) is now one of the most dangerous countries in West Africa. Since 2019, three Nigerian journalists have been [killed](#) with complete impunity while covering street demonstrations. Finally, the past year has brought no response about the fate of 11 journalists detained in **Eritrea** (down 2 at 180th) – now at the very bottom of the Index – 20 years after a crackdown that shut down all independent media outlets and sent journalists to prison camps or into self-imposed exile.