

Middle East

Status quo holds in Iran, violence in Iraq

In Iran (166th), journalists are the target of very aggressive behaviour by the authorities, who tolerate no criticism or expression of political or social demands. As in the past, it is Iran that jails the largest number of journalists in the Middle East. Nine are currently held there. Many other journalists are facing serious, trumped-up charges that could result in their being imprisoned for criticising stoning or corruption, or for working for foreign news media.

In Iraq (157th), what journalists fear most are the armed groups that target them without the authorities ever finding a way to put an end to the litany of violence. More than 200 journalists and media assistants have been killed since the start of the US-led invasion in March 2003.

Disappointment in the Maghreb

The performance of the countries of North Africa has been mixed, with insignificant rises by Algeria (123rd) and Tunisia (145th) and disturbing falls by Morocco (106th) and Egypt (146th) because of the large number of prosecutions brought against the press. Coverage of police abuses, use of torture during interrogation and the lack of judicial independence stang the Egyptian authorities into tightening the vice on independent journalists. Despite all the harassment, the independent media have openly displayed their lack of enthusiasm for the possibility that Gamal Mubarak could succeed his father as president.

Although better off than their Egyptian colleagues, Morocco's journalists have in the past 12 months been the target of repeated attacks for which they were not prepared. Confiscation of newspaper issues, temporary closures of newspapers, summonses for questioning, imprisonment and severe sentences will leave lasting scars on the journalistic community, which is now very mistrustful of the government's promises of reform.

Respite for Gulf journalists

There has been progress by some Gulf countries – Kuwait (63rd), United Arab Emirates (65th) and Qatar (79th). The authorities have displayed a tendency to be more open-minded and, in some cases, initiatives have been taken with a view to liberalising press laws. But self-censorship continues to be widespread in the press in these countries.

For the first time, Saudi Arabia (148th) has climbed out of the bottom 20. Saudi journalists enjoyed something of a respite in the past year. But the controlled exercised by the information ministry's media surveillance committee prevents the Wahhabi-led kingdom from rising higher in the ranking.