

## PRESS FREEDOM INDEX 2016: REGIONS

### **Africa's journalists, victims of terrorism, armed conflict and election crises.**

Media freedom violations seem to be taking a growing toll on journalists in Africa. The biggest deterioration was seen in South Sudan (140th), which fell 15 places in the Index. In this country torn by civil war since 2013, journalists fell victim to the conflict's violence and a campaign of intimidation by the authorities.

Countries with political crises fell in the rankings. In Republic of Congo (115th), Uganda (102nd) and Djibouti (172nd), a presidential desire to hold on to power led to pre-election violence against journalists and harsh, government-orchestrated censorship of the media. As a result of the president's obstinacy in Burundi (156th), the leading independent media were destroyed, more than 100 journalists fled abroad and Burundi fell 11 places in the Index.

A collapse in the rule of law and an increase in violence in certain regions account for the decline in countries such as Nigeria (116th), where journalists were threatened by both Boko Haram members and state agents. The presence of Jihadi groups had a direct impact on freedom of information in countries such as Mali (122nd), where in 2015 a terrorist group called the "Guardians of Hell" threatened to behead all foreign and Malian journalists working for foreign media.

Eritrea (180th) came last in the Index yet again. Nothing has changed in this country, where freedom of information is not just flouted but is literally abolished. The authorities half-opened their doors to foreign journalists, who were controlled very closely, but kept the doors of their prisons firmly shut on local journalists.

At the opposite end of the scale, Namibia was Africa's best-ranked country at 17th place. Its constitution guarantees media freedom, its journalists are safe, its media landscape is diverse and no restrictions are placed on the Internet.

### **Reporting constrained by terror in the Middle East and North Africa**

The Middle East and North Africa continued to be one of the world's most difficult and dangerous regions for journalists, who in many places were trapped between rival factions, belligerents, radical groups and governments that behave in an extreme fashion and are often adept at their own terror strategies.

Between terrorism and abusive counter-terrorism, where was the room for independent journalism? What with the subjects that are traditionally off limits –

subjects linked to politics (ruling families) and religion (blasphemy and apostasy) – the list of obstacles to media freedom kept on getting longer.

In open-conflict zones, combatants tried to create black holes for reporting. As it has been for the past four years, the situation was worst in Syria (177th), which saw the most appalling and sometime barbaric abuses. Practicing journalism required enormous courage amid the growing impunity and acute political crises in countries such as Iraq (158th, down 2), Libya (164th, down 10) and Yemen (170th, down 2).

In countries “at peace” (often a police-state peace), journalism was stifled by leaders seeking to maintain stability. This was the case in Egypt (159th, down 1) and Bahrain (162nd, up 1). In Iran, (169th, up 4), the regime continued to imprison journalists and harass the media. The media landscape darkened in Algeria (129th, down 10) with the forced closure of TV stations, Kuwait (103rd, down 13) with the adoption of a cyber-crime law, and Jordan (135th, up 8) where an anti-terrorism law was used to gag the media.

Tunisia (96th, up 30) was the only country in the Arab-Muslim world to experience significant progress in 2015. Many challenges remain in Tunisia but a successful transition to democracy has facilitated media reform initiatives in the past five years. With media that are fairly free, Israel (101st) and Lebanon (98th) also head the regional rankings.

### **Journalism under the gun and club in the Americas**

Media freedom declined in the Americas in 2015 because of mounting political tension in many countries fuelled by economic recession, uncertainty about the future and weakening solidarity between communities.

The main obstacles to media freedom came from institutional violence, as in Venezuela (139th, down 2) and Ecuador (109th), from organized crime, as in Honduras (137th, down 4), from corruption, as in Brazil (104th, down 5), from concentrated media ownership, as in Argentina (54th) and from cyber-surveillance, above all in the United States (41st).

Colombia and most of Central America suffer from organized crime, including cartels, paramilitary groups and drug traffickers. Investigative reporting is dangerous or impossible in these countries because of the determination of these groups and the level of violence, which includes beheadings.

Mexico (149th, down 1) saw many murders of journalists that were linked corruption and drug trafficking. The region’s biggest fall was by El Salvador (58th), which plunged 13 places. In this small Central American country dogged by cartel violence, media freedom has declined steadily since 2014 and the election that year of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, who has accused the media of waging a “psychological terror campaign” against his government.

The state often has a tight grip on the media in Latin America. In Panama (91st), which fell eight places, access to information remained partly under state control and coverage of sensitive subjects such as corruption led to defamation proceedings. The region’s two biggest media freedom violators continued to be Venezuela (139th), where opposition and independent media struggled to survive in the face of President Nicolas Maduro’s intimidation and manoeuvring,

and – way below the others – Cuba (171st, down 2), where Raúl Castro's regime maintained its almost total control over news and information.

Costa Rica (6th, up 10) was yet again the region's leader and this year even entered the world's top ten. Its legislation is very favourable for the media, it accords journalists proper recognition and it is the only Central American country not to suffer from corruption and its consequences on access to information. Jamaica (10th, down 1) and Canada (18th) were the region's other leaders, although Canada fell 10 places because media freedom suffered a great deal in the last few months of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's administration.

### **A nice postcard from the Pacific, but not Asia**

The media freedom situation worsened significantly or stagnated in most of the Asia-Pacific region. The decline affected eastern Asia's democracies, previously regarded as regional models. In the year since the law on the protection of specially designated secrets took effect in Japan (72nd, down 11) in December 2014, many media outlets, including state-owned ones, succumbed to self-censorship, especially vis-à-vis the prime minister, and surrendered their independence.

In South Korea (70th, down 10), relations between the media and government have become much more fraught under President Park Geun-hye. In Hong Kong (69th), where Chinese businessmen are increasingly interested in acquiring media outlets, media independence continued to be the main challenge for freedom of information.

In China (176th), the Communist Party took repression to new heights. Journalists were spared nothing, not even abductions, televised forced confessions and threats to relatives. In a recent tour of the country's leading news organizations, President Xi Jinping said the media "must love the Party, protect the Party, and closely align themselves with the Party leadership in thought, politics and action." He could not have made his totalitarian view of the media's role any clearer.

After improving last year, Burma (143rd) and Philippines (138th) saw their scores decline in the 2016 Index, revealing the limits of the reforms and measures taken to improve media freedom and safety. Singapore (154th) suffered the region's second biggest decline, after the Sultanate of Brunei (155th, down 34), where the progressive introduction of the Sharia and blasphemy charges fuelled self-censorship. The governments of India (133rd) and Bangladesh (144th) took little action in response to violence against media personnel and were sometimes directly involved in violations of their freedom.

Sri Lanka (141st, up 24 places) is the Asian country that rose most in the 2016 Index. Its journalists no longer had to fear telephone threats or enforced disappearances encouraged by the Rajapaksa family, especially the former president's brother, former defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Its news media also fortunately recovered their former readiness to speak out even if they obviously still lag far behind the dynamism and combativeness of the media in Samoa (29th, up 11), where the Media Council law adopted in early 2015 decriminalized defamation, strengthened pluralism and gave the media more leeway to criticize.

In Tonga (37th, up 7), the independent media have progressively assumed their watchdog role since the first democratic elections in 2010. In Fiji (80th, up 13), despite the threats that the constitution and legislation pose to journalists, the media have asserted their independence, improved the public debate and succumbed less and less to self-censorship. A fine Pacific island postcard.

### **Another turn of the screw in the post-Soviet region**

Media freedom has declined steadily in the post-Soviet states. Nearly two thirds of the region's countries are ranked around 150th or lower in the Index and their scores keep on falling. The fact that Russia (148th, up 4) improved its ranking slightly should not raise hopes because its score fell as a result of the persecution of critics, which has reached levels not seen for three decades. And Russia's behaviour has legitimized the growing repression throughout the region because Moscow acts as a regional "model," albeit a negative one as regards media freedom.

Beset by economic and security threats, the region's authoritarian regimes seemed to know only one response – tightening the screw – although their crackdowns just fuelled more tension. In Tajikistan (150th, down 34), which fell furthest in the Index, President Emomali Rahmon used "counter-terrorism" as grounds for gagging critics and consolidating his personal power, and in so doing jeopardized the fragile national consensus.

Brandishing imaginary threats and the resulting need for stability to justify holding on to power is the favourite pastime of the eternal despots in Uzbekistan (166th), Kazakhstan (160th), Turkmenistan (178th), Azerbaijan (163rd) and Belarus (157th). The regional economic crisis, the shockwave from the Ukrainian revolution and in some cases the uncertainty surrounding an approaching succession provided further grist to their mill. Not content with having long suppressed all expression of discontent, these regimes tightened their grip on Internet users and hounded the few remaining independent journalists.

After plummeting in the 2015 Index because of the Maidan crackdown and the fighting in the east, Ukraine (107th) has jumped 22 places in the latest Index thanks to a significant decline in violence and to some long-awaited reforms. But major challenges remain, starting with the oligarchs' grip on the media and the "information war" with Russia. There was little change in the four regional countries that continued to be ranked best: Georgia (64th), Armenia (74th), Moldova (76th) and Kyrgyzstan (85th). Aside from the disparities in the situation of each of these four countries, media polarization and the lack of media independence are major challenges that they all share.

Located on its southwestern edge, Turkey (151st) suffered the region's second biggest fall in score because of the turmoil resulting from the Syrian conflict and the resumption of fighting with the PKK Kurdish rebels. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's growing authoritarianism and the paranoia displayed by the authorities just deepened the fault lines in an already polarized society.

### **Europe threatened by demons, its own and the world's**

The past year seems to have confirmed the trend seen in the 2015 Index – progressive erosion of the European model. Counter-espionage and counter-terrorist measures were misused. Laws were passed allowing mass surveillance.

Conflicts of interest increased. Authorities tightened their grip on state media and sometimes privately-owned media as well. All in all, the continent that respects media freedom most seemed to be on a downhill course.

Poland (47th, down 29) fell spectacularly in the 2016 index as a result of the government's declared aim of restoring foreign-owned Polish media to Polish ownership and a law, enacted in early 2016, allowing the government to hire and fire those who run Poland's public radio and television. In Hungary (67th), the government controlled a Media Council tasked with ensuring respect for "public decency" and "human dignity" as well as defining them.

Media ownership by conglomerates with a wide range of business interests has long posed a threat to journalistic independence, but the threat is growing and is endangering the European model. This is the case in France (45th), where most of the private-sector national media are now owned by a handful of businessmen with interests in areas of the economy unrelated to the media. In Bulgaria (113th, down 7), which has the European Union's lowest ranking, politicians and interest groups control most of the media. In Macedonia (118th), selective allocation of state advertising was used to control and gag the media.

In the United Kingdom (38th, down 4), the police used the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) to violate the confidentiality of journalists' sources, while the number of police raids with the same objective increased in Italy (7th, down 4), a country where threats from the mafia are also frequent. Southeastern Europe was not spared. Physical violence was reported in Croatia (65th, down 5) and Serbia (59th), where journalists were taken hostage or were the targets of petrol bombs.

Some of the threats to journalists were directly linked to rising nationalism, such as death threats in Sweden (8th, down 3) and the physical attacks during anti-Muslim demonstrations in Germany (16th, down 4). And finally, it was in Paris that the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* took place on 7 January 2015, an attack masterminded from Yemen. So, Europe was also the victim of the world's demons.