

## RSF's 2018 Index

### Journalism sorely tested in North Africa

North Africa's performance in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index reflects the different pressures to which journalists are exposed. Restrictive laws, reporting problems (especially at protests), and subjects that are off limits all prevent journalists from being free to provide independently reported and pluralist news and information.

Tunisia (97th), Morocco (135th), Algeria (136th) and Libya (167th) are part of a region (Middle East/North Africa) with the world's lowest overall level of respect for press freedom. Tunisia has not moved in the Index, Morocco and Algeria have both fallen two places in the past year, while Libya, the worst-ranked of the four, has actually risen one place. But this rise is deceptive and is due in part to declines in other countries near the bottom of the Index, and in part to a fall in the number of violations after the exodus of so many journalists from what is now a very dangerous country.

The overall trend in North Africa in recent years reflects a clear desire on the part of its leaders to control the media and target journalists who dare to cover forbidden subjects such as corruption, tax fraud, influential lobbies, and sometimes even demonstrations.

#### Obstacles to reporting

The "[Hirak](#)" protest movement in northern Morocco's Rif region exposed the difficulties that both Moroccan and foreign reporters encounter when trying to cover streets protests or other taboo subjects in Morocco. According to RSF's tally, [14 journalists and citizen-journalists were arrested](#) in the crackdown on media coverage of the protests from May to July 2017 and [several foreign journalists were deported](#).

Similarly, in Tunisia, both Tunisian and [foreign journalists](#) were subjected to [administrative and police harassment](#), especially in connection with the coverage of protests. Radio reporter Hamdi Souissi was covering a protest in Sfax in September when he was assaulted by policemen, who inflicted injuries to his face and shoulder, interrogated him for two hours at a police station, and confiscated his equipment.

Reporting is particularly risky in Libya, now one of the world's most dangerous countries for media personnel. Journalists and media outlets are the leading victims of the information war waged by the various parties to the country's armed conflicts. Since the start of the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, RSF has tallied a total of 332 acts of violence and abuses against

journalists and citizen-journalists in Libya, most of which have gone [unpunished](#). No steps have been taken by any of the various authorities to improve the safety of media personnel and self-imposed exile is often the only option for those who want to continue working as journalists.

Algeria has many red lines for journalists and the mere mention of subjects such as corruption or the president's health can lead to threats, online harassment, or arrest. As well as prosecuting media outlets, the Algerian authorities also use [political and financial pressure](#). Hadda Hazem, the editor of the Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Fadjr*, went on hunger strike in mid-November, accusing the government of inflicting an "orchestrated death" on her newspaper by depriving it of all state advertising. This was one of the main sources of income for the Algerian media since October.

### **Restrictive legislation**

Legislative reforms that are supposed to guarantee the freedom to inform have been initiated in some of the region's countries without so far being finalized. In Tunisia, the broadcast media bill that the government submitted to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People in December was disappointing because it lacks guarantees regarding the independence and powers of future regulatory authorities. [Several national and international NGOs](#), including RSF, called for the bill's withdrawal.

Legislative progress is also inadequate in Libya. The [draft constitution](#) proposed in July 2017 falls short of international standards for protecting freedom of the press and expression. It neither provides enough guarantees for the right of access to information nor enough protection for media independence.

In Algeria, the criminal code adopted in 2016 is applied arbitrarily to journalists in violation of constitutional provisions guaranteeing press freedom. Provisions for prison sentences were removed from Morocco's press law but it still specifically provides for application of the criminal code and terrorism law to journalists.

Because legislation provides journalists in North Africa with insufficient protection, or even poses a threat to them, they face the possibility of prison sentences as soon as their reporting starts to aggravate the authorities.

### **Journalists in prison**

Journalists still receive prison sentences in both Morocco and Algeria. [Hamid El Mahdaoui](#), the editor of the Moroccan news website Badil.info, has been held since July 2017. Arrested while covering the protests in Al-Hoceïma in the Rif region, he was initially sentenced to three months in prison and a fine of 20,000 dirhams but an appeal court in Al-Hoceïma upped his sentence in September to a year in prison. He and four other detained journalists and citizen-journalists and three media workers are also defendants in a Rif protests mass trial in which some 50 hearings have so far been held.

[Saïd Chitour](#), a journalist arrested in Algeria in June 2017 on suspicion of spying and selling classified documents to foreign diplomats, is still awaiting trial and according to RSF's information, his state of health is extremely worrying.

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