RSF's 2018 Index
The dangers of reporting in Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa has maintained its third place in the ranking by geographical region, with a slightly better overall indicator than in 2017. But there is a wide range of situations within the region, and journalists are often the victims of intimidation, physical violence, and arrest.

Namibia (26th), which has yet to adopt a promised law on access to information, has surrendered the title of best-ranked African country to Ghana (23rd). At the other end of the Index, Africa still hasmany news and information black holes. Press freedom is non-existent in Eritrea (second from last at 179th), Djibouti (173rd), Burundi (159th) and Somalia (168th), where four journalists were killed in terrorist attacks in 2017.

Reporting difficulties

Investigative reporting is very risky for journalists in Africa. This is the case, for example, in Tanzania (down ten places at 93rd, one of this year's biggest falls), where President John Magufuli tolerates no criticism. A popular news forum's founder was summoned to court dozens of times in the space of a year to name his sources, while a reporter who was investigating a series of murders of local officials went missing in November 2017.

In Madagascar (54th), a journalist was given a jail sentence (albeit suspended) for the first time in 40 years as a result of investigative reporting that exposed corruption. In Swaziland (152nd), a newspaper editor had to flee to South Africa after questioning a decision to award a licence to a local mobile phone company.

In Democratic Republic of Congo (154th), Journalist in Danger (JED), RSF's partner organization, documented 121 cases of abuses against the media in 2017. Attacks, arbitrary arrests, and media closures constitute an organized system for preventing journalists from covering the Congolese regime's dangerous authoritarianism.

Covering street protests is a delicate exercise in many African countries. In Togo (86th), the authorities withdrew the accreditation of an international TV broadcaster's correspondent after she covered opposition protests. In Guinea (down three places at 104th), the president's direct threats to close media outlets that interviewed a union leader helped create a climate of hostility towards the media. Radio stations were closed while journalists were sometimes targeted by protesters.

In response to threats and attacks on reporters during demonstrations in Chad (123rd), the country's journalists staged a "Day without Press" protest in February 2018. Sudan (still near the bottom of the Index at 174th) continues to be one of the continent's riskiest places for street reporting. In January 2018, 18 journalists were arrested and several media outlets were

shut down amid protests against a bread price increase. In neighbouring South Sudan (144th), it has become almost impossible to cover the four-year-old civil war. In 2017, 20 foreign journalists were banned from the country and a freelance war reporter was fatally shot during conflict in the south.

Internet cuts or restrictions on access to online social networks are now widely used in Africa as censorship tools to gag dissent and prevent coverage of unrest within a sector of the population. They are systematically imposed on the eve of every street protest in Democratic Republic of Congo.

In Cameroon (129th), an unprecedented complaint was filed against the government before its own Constitutional Council after it disconnected the Internet for several months in two English-speaking regions that were protesting against discrimination. After falling 10 places in 2016, Uganda has fallen another five places to 117th, in part because it created a special security unit to closely monitor websites and social networks.

Some subjects still off limits

In a disturbing trend, journalists are encountering growing difficulties when covering subjects with national security ramifications. This is the case in Nigeria (119th) and Mali (115th), where journalists are often harassed by the authorities. They are accused of undermining troop morale when they refer to the difficulties of the security forces in combatting terrorism.

The Cameroonian journalist **Ahmed Abba** was released in December 2017 after being held for 29 months for covering the activities of the Jihadi armed group Boko Haram. In Côte d'Ivoire (82nd), the authorities detained eight journalists in order to ask them to name their sources for articles about sizeable army mutinies in 2017.

Mauritania (whose 17 place fall to 72nd was Africa's largest decline) has passed a law making apostasy and blasphemy punishable by death even when the offender repents. The blogger **Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed** is still detained despite having completed a two-year jail sentence for "heresy." Slavery, which still exists in Mauritania although now illegal, is a highly sensitive subject that sometimes gets foreign reporters expelled.

A recent RSF report highlighted the fact that journalists who cover stories involving women's rights or gender issues often suffer severe reprisals. In Somalia, journalists who interview rape victims are liable to be jailed on defamation charges. In Uganda, a journalist was abducted and beaten after pointing out that the president had not kept his promise to distribute tampons in schools.

More generally, any reporting critical of the authorities tends to get a poor reception in sub-Saharan Africa, as seen in the one-year jail sentence passed on appeal on **Baba Alpha**, a TV journalist in Niger (down two places at 63rd) who has a reputation for drawing attention to bad government practices. After completing his sentence, he was recently expelled to neighbouring Mali as a "threat to internal state security."

Restrictive laws

The new media laws adopted during the past year did not encourage more journalistic freedom and independence. The anticipated decriminalization of press offences in Senegal (up eight places at 50th), was not included in the new press code adopted in June 2017.

There are no longer any grounds for detaining journalists in the new media law approved by Côte d'Ivoire's national assembly but journalists can still be the subject of prosecutions for insulting the president or for defamation. Terrorism laws are often used to arrest journalists in Ethiopia (150th) and Nigeria (119th).

The only good news in this domain came from Malawi (whose six-place rise to 64th was Africa's second biggest) with the promulgation of a law facilitating access to information about elected officials and government institutions, 12 years after it began being debated.

Promising regime change?

The departure of some of the continent's worst press freedom predators could open the way to a new era for journalism in the countries concerned.

In Gambia (which soared 21 places to 122nd), the new president has promised a less restrictive media law and the inclusion of free speech in the constitution. In Zimbabwe (up two places at 126th), Robert Mugabe's successor, his former right-hand man, has also promised reforms and a "new democracy" in a country with especially draconian media laws.

The prospect of finally seeing the birth of free and independent journalism in Angola (up four places at 121st) is more uncertain. Joao Lourenço's installation as president after 38 years of rule by the Dos Santos clan has not yet lead to any significant improvement in media freedom.

In these three countries, the promises made after the installation of new leaders need to be translated quickly into concrete measures that finally allow the freedom to inform.

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