



2020 RSF Index: Future of African journalism under threat from all sides

On the 2020 World Press Freedom Index map, compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 21 African countries appear in red or black. Those who produce news and information are working in difficult, even critical, conditions. The coming decade will be decisive for the future of journalism on the continent.

Press freedom remains highly fragile in sub-Saharan Africa. The fall of several dictators and authoritarian governments in recent years in countries such as **Angola** (up three at 106th), **Ethiopia** (up 11 at 99th), **Gambia** (up five at 87th), the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** (up 4 at 150th), **Sudan** (up 16 at 159th) and **Zimbabwe** (up one at 126th), has loosened the noose on journalists in these countries.

However, the profound changes needed to allow high-quality, free and independent journalism to flourish are few and far between. Worse, some countries such as **Tanzania** (down six at 124th) and **Benin** (down 17 at 113th) have seen significant retreats. Arrests and arbitrary and lengthy detentions are increasing, as are on-line attacks and repressive new laws which can be abused to curb freedom of news and information on the pretext of fighting disinformation and Internet crime.

Decriminalizing journalism and protecting journalists

Journalists continue to lose their lives in Africa and the killers generally go unpunished. According to RSF figures, 102 journalists have been killed in the continent over the past 10 years, half of them in Somalia (up one at 163rd). Somalia remains the most dangerous country for reporters despite significant progress towards punishing police officers and military personnel who commit violence against media workers.

In the DRC one journalist was killed in the west of the country last year and colleagues were forced to flee to escape the same fate. News organizations covering the response to the Ebola epidemic have regularly been targeted. In West Africa, an investigation into the murder of the investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale in **Ghana** (down three at 30th) in January last year failed to identify those responsible. In **Nigeria** (up five at 115th), those behind the killing of two journalists, shot dead six months apart while covering protests, are still on the loose.

Journalists' safety remains a major issue and requires greater legal protection. In this respect, the abolition of custodial sentences imposed on journalists for carrying out their work remains unfinished business. Some journalists, such as the former head of the state radio and TV broadcaster in **Cameroon** (up three at 134th), Amadou Vamouké, are tried by special courts without due process. Vamouké has been held in provisional detention since 2016. Eritrea is the only country in Africa where his fellow journalists are treated as harshly.

In 2019, RSF reported the arbitrary detention of 171 journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. More than half of the continent's countries have resorted to such practices, even where local laws may have already decriminalized press offences. When reform of repressive laws is lagging, new all-purpose legislation in the name of the fight against disinformation or hate speech crops up everywhere.

These laws never fulfil their stated objectives but can easily be misused to curb freedom of information. Press laws are circumvented and journalists are accused of being, among other things, terrorists, spies, crooks or cybercriminals with the aim of silencing them.

In Benin, the investigative journalist Ignace Sossou was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment under a new digital law for "harassment by means of electronic communications". He accurately tweeted statements of public concern and should never have been prosecuted for something that was strictly journalistic.

In **Chad**, (down one at 123rd), the charge against newspaper publisher Martin Inoua Doulguet was changed from defamation to cyber-bullying. The charges against Tanzanian investigative journalist Erick Kabendera were changed three times with the aim of keeping him in detention. He was released after seven months but still faces prosecution. His arbitrary detention is one reason for Tanzania's big drop in the Index (down six at 124th). It has fallen 57 places since 2016. No other country has seen such a rapid decline in its position in recent years.

The new threats: cyber-censorship, cyber-surveillance and cyber-attacks

Sudan (up 16 at 159th), on the other hand, has made great progress since the overthrow of President Omar al-Bashir in April last year. The number of direct attacks, arrests of journalists and censorship of newspapers has fallen considerably, although news organizations, particularly online, are still monitored. According to information received by RSF, the Cyber Jihadist Unit, an offshoot of the intelligence services, is still active and continues to track journalists' activities.

The communications of journalists and African news media are increasingly monitored and they face online censorship and attacks. They can also face smear tactics, as happened in 2019 to the National Media Group, the first privately-owned media group in **Kenya** (down three at 103rd), which was tagged with the hashtag #NationMediaGarbage by trolls close to the government, and of drowning in social media chaos where reliable news and information is often swamped by a jumble of propaganda, conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Among new threats, cyber-censorship continues to gain ground and has become a highly effective weapon against journalism in Africa. Since 2015, almost half of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa assessed by RSF have used cyber-censorship, at least 10 of them in the past year alone. These include the DRC, **Mauritania** (down three at 97th), **Malawi** (down one at 69th) and Ethiopia. Chad holds the record in this regard, having cut off social media for 470 days consecutively, depriving journalists and citizens of access to essential news outlets.

Historic political accountability

As the world of online news and information undergoes fundamental change, traditional news media still have trouble breaking free from political and economic constraints 30 years after the sector was liberalized. In most African countries, state media have yet to achieve this. They

remain firmly in the grip of government, generally content to relay government statements without reflecting the diversity of opinion within their societies. The proliferation of news outlets in a growing number of countries provides only the appearance of pluralism. Most news organizations remain, directly or indirectly, in thrall to government, opposition or financial interests.

Only firm political decisions can usher in high-quality independent media. This also holds true for investigative journalism, which requires commitment on the part of those willing to take it up even in the highest-ranking countries such as **Namibia** (23rd), top of the list of African countries in this edition. There, too, disclosures about the dubious allocation of fishing quotas led to an increase in verbal attacks by senior political figures and the dismissal of one journalist at the official news agency.

At the other end of the Index, **Eritrea** (178th), which has the largest number of journalists in prison in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, with 11 media workers behind bars from whom nothing has been heard for many years, and **Djibouti** (down three at 176th), remain black holes for independent news and information. In **Rwanda**, (155th) the crackdown on dissident voices has been so severe that self-censorship is now the rule.

Tanzania and **Burundi** (down one at 160th), where four journalists were jailed merely for covering a story that the authorities hoped would be ignored, is slipping perilously towards the camp of countries where critical stories no longer see the light of day. Others, such as Benin, **Mozambique** (down one at 104th) and the **Comoros** (down 19 at 75th), where attacks on press freedom mushroomed during a disputed election, have also been heading in a worrying direction.

At a time when misinformation is increasing, the next decade will see historic choices for journalism in Africa. Societies where factual accuracy and open discussion of ideas are cardinal values must firmly and unequivocally support journalists, giving them legal protection, providing financial support that is not based on political favour in a precarious sector whose employees are vulnerable to influence, and expanding training facilities – still few and far between -- before and during a journalist's career.