

**Press freedom situation in Syria  
ten years after Bashar el-Assad's installation  
"The government still decides who can be a journalist"**

Reporters Without Borders has assessed the press freedom situation in Syria on the eve of the 10th anniversary of Bashar el-Assad's succession to the presidency on his father's death, and the findings are depressing. All the talk of political and legislative reforms never produced any results. As in his foreign policy, Assad says one thing and does another.

The number of news media has increased in the past decade but there is no room for media diversity. The Baath Party continues to maintain complete control of the press. Syria's reemergence on the international stage has not changed this.

Syria's social and political reality is completely opaque. It is extremely difficult for international human rights organisations to interview people. The population is afraid to talk, afraid to provide information. The intelligence services (*mukhabarat*) are ubiquitous and all powerful. As a result, Syria has been turned into a vast prison.

Syria is ranked 165th out of 175 countries in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index and is on the list of "Enemies of the Internet" that the organisation updates every year, while Assad is regarded as one of the world's 40 worst "Predators of press freedom."

**Repressive laws**

Assad is still refusing to make the democratic concessions that have been awaited ever since he took office in July 2000. The state of emergency that has been in force since 1963 has not been repealed. It suspends all of the constitution's provisions regarding civil liberties. Political parties are currently all illegal. A law that would regulate their creation and functioning has been in the drafting stage for 10 years.

Article 38 of Syria's 1950 constitution says that "every citizen has the right to express their opinion publicly and with complete freedom, verbally or in writing and through all means of expression (...). The state guarantees freedom of the press, printing and publishing according to the law." Syria is also a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (of which article 19 enshrines freedom of expression) and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

A series of special provisions nonetheless violate the constitution and Syria's international undertakings. For example, article 4 of the Baath Party's 1947 constitution says: "The state is responsible for guaranteeing freedom of speech, publishing, assembly, protest and press within the limits of Arab identity's interests, and offers all the means and capacities for realising this freedom." The state of emergency, for its part, restricts all civil liberties and, in a general manner, invalidates the constitution.

The media are subject to a particularly restrictive decree that was promulgated in 2001. It forbids any questioning of Syria's "untouchable" principles: the interests of the Syrian people, the Baath Party (which has been in power since 1963), national unity, the armed forces and the president's political guidance. "Reporting false information or falsifying documents" is punishable by one to three years in prison.

### **Complete control of state and privately-owned media**

It is the prime minister who (on the basis of proposals submitted by the information minister) decides who can be a journalist, correspondent or editor in Syria. Journalists have to be registered with the Union of Journalists in order to obtain a press card issued by the ministry. The union is used by the government as a tool for controlling the country's journalists.

The Baath Party continues to maintain a tight grip on all radio and TV broadcasting, while the print media have no choice but to relay what the regime says. A few publications have been launched in recent years that are not directly controlled by the government but this does not mean that restrictions are being eased. Each publication must be approved by the information ministry (and the intelligence services) before it is issued.

The national news agency *Sana*, created in 1965 and controlled by the information ministry, provides a bland and carefully standardised vision of domestic events and Syria's foreign policy.

### **Repression of government opponents who want democracy**

The speech Assad gave when he was sworn in 10 years ago gave no sign of any intention to make the regime more democratic. It was nonetheless followed by pro-democracy initiatives by activists and attempts to organise campaigns. This period of political activity led some to hope that winds of freedom were going to blow through Syria. Many people signed the "Manifesto of the 99" and the "Communiqué of the 1000," appeals to the new president to end the one-party system and open up the political arena.

We know how the "Damascus Spring" episode ended. Many leading Syrian figures who believed in the possibility of change were arrested and jailed at the end of 2001. They included journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists.

In an attempt to break out of the political and institutional paralysis, former political prisoners and various leading figures issued a “Damascus Declaration for National Democratic and Peaceful Change” in October 2005.

This was followed by the Damascus Beirut / Beirut Damascus Declaration, a joint statement by 300 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals calling for the normalisation of relations between Syria and Lebanon. It was after signing this appeal that journalist and writer **Michel Kilo** was arrested on 14 May 2006 and was sentenced to three years in prison for “undermining national sentiment.” He served the entire sentence and has been in poor health ever since his release in May 2009. He was given the Speaker Abbot Award in October 2008 while still in Damascus’s Adra prison.

The signatories of the Damascus Declaration formed a National Council, whose members met in Damascus on 1 December 2007 to elect a secretariat and reaffirm their commitment to democratic reforms as the outcome of a “peaceful and progressive process.” The government’s response was not long in coming. Around 40 of the National Council’s members were arrested the same month and in the first few weeks of 2008.

Twelve of them were given 30-month jail sentences on 29 October 2008 on charges of “disseminating false information with the aim of harming the state,” “membership of a secret organisation designed to destabilise the state” and “inciting ethnic and racial tension.” They included three journalists: **Ali Al-Abdallah** (arrested 17 December 2007), **Fayez Sara** (arrested 3 January 2008) and **Akram Al-Bounni** (arrested 12 December 2007). All of the 12 detainees were released on completing their sentences except the journalist Ali Al-Abdallah.

The authorities cracked down even harder in the second half of 2009. Under prodding from the intelligence services, the information ministry began interrogating and arresting human rights activists, lawyers and journalists. Many were questioned about articles that were said to constitute “an attack on the nation” or “threat to state security.” Few dared to talk about this, even anonymously.

[The Syrian Centre for Media and Free Expression was closed on 13 September 2009](#) and its office was placed under seal. It was the country’s only NGO specialising in media issues, Internet access and media monitoring during election campaigns. Operating without a government permit, it had until then monitored violations of journalists’ rights and had taken the lead in condemning information minister Mohsen Bilal’s bans on the dissemination of many newspapers and magazines.

Two journalists, **Souhayla Ismail** and **Bassem Ali**, were charged before a court in Homs (160 km north of Damascus) on 13 April 2010 with “resisting the socialist order.” An appeal court in Homs transferred the case on 7 July to a military tribunal, which comes under the authority of the state of emergency law.

The charge was brought in connection with two reports, published in 2005 and 2006, about alleged corruption and embezzlement by the head of Al-Asmida, a state-owned fertilizer company in the north of the country. It comes nearly four years after the regime's conversion to a market economy and its integration into international trade mechanisms. But the constitution has not been changed and article 1/15 of the law on economic sanctions, allowing for the prosecution of those who disagree with the socialist system, is still in force.

According to information obtained by Reporters Without Borders, the directorate for information recently banned the publication of several newspaper issues or delayed their distribution. Four issues of *Sahafiyat Al-Khabar*, for example, were banned and the distribution of two other issues was delayed. These measures were prompted by the fact that the newspaper had, on its back page, quoted religious comments by the local director of information. Other government newspapers such as Tashrin had quoted these comments without any problem.

Journalists and cyber-dissidents are constantly watched and are often summoned for questioning. Those who challenge government policy quickly find themselves being arrested and jailed. Many have left the country because of the threats and harassment.

### **Ali Al-Abdallah case as an example of Syria's repressive system**

Arrested on 17 December 2007, journalist Ali Al-Abdallah (a Damascus Declaration National Council member) should have been released on 16 June 2010 on completing his 30-month jail sentence. But instead, the authorities decided to bring a new prosecution against him on charges of "disseminating false information with the aim of harming the state" (article 286 of the criminal code) and "desire to hurt Syria's relations with another state" (article 276 of the criminal code).

The charges were based on the fact that, while in prison, he managed to post an article online on 23 August 2009 criticising Iran's "wilayat al-faqih" doctrine, which gives the country's clerics absolute power over political affairs. He was taken for interrogation by Political Security officials and was told that he would remain in prison pending a new trial. He appeared before a military court in Damascus on 11 July and was then taken back to Adra prison.

The case is particularly worrying as it shows that it is dangerous for journalists to criticise not only the government but also its allies.

### **Online free expression**

The Internet is far from being spared by Syria's censors. Syria is one of the more repressive countries in this respect and is on the Reporters Without Borders list of "Enemies of the Internet."

According to the Syrian Centre for Media and Free Expression, a total of 241 news and information websites are blocked in Syria. They include 49 Kurdish sites, 35 opposition sites, 22 Lebanese sites, 15 human rights sites and nine cultural sites. The General Telecommunications Company and the Syrian Scientific Association for Information are jointly responsible for blocking websites inside Syria. The blocking of individual sites is combined with keyword filtering. Online censorship was stepped up in 2009 and above all targets social networks and blog platforms including YouTube and Maktoob. After having a minimal online presence for years, the government now uses the Internet, above all the Sana and Syrian News websites, to disseminate its propaganda.

Many bloggers have been harassed by the authorities since the end of 2008 for contributing to online publications. They have been accused of “defaming the state” under article 287 of the criminal code or of “publishing false information” and “undermining national sentiment” under articles 285 and 286.

In 2005, the information ministry set about redrafting the press code with the aim of making it cover the Internet and online publications, which are currently regulated by the criminal code. After being shelved, the proposed reform was updated in May 2009 and again this year. If adopted, it would have a significant further negative impact on the Syrian media.

Since 2007, Internet café managers have been obliged by law to register the personal data of clients who post articles online or comments on discussion forums. Website editors are obliged to publish the names of those who contribute to the site and those who post comments. They can be forced to close the site for failing to comply.

The state security supreme court in Damascus sentenced blogger **Kareem Arbaji** to three years in jail on 13 September 2009 on a charge of “publishing mendacious information liable to weaken the nation’s morale” under article 286 of the criminal code. Arbaji, who helped manage Akhawia, an online forum covering all kinds of subject, spent two years in pre-trial detention following his arrest on 6 July 2007 by military intelligence officers. He was freed on 6 January 2010, after representatives of the Christian church in Syria addressed a request to the president’s office for his early release on the grounds that his father was in very poor health.

The blogger **Kamal Sheikhou ben Hussein**, the author of many articles on the All4Syria website, was arrested on 25 June 2010 as he tried to enter Lebanon with his brother’s passport. He was not using his own passport because he had been banned from leaving the country. It is not known where he is being held.

Despite the harsh repression and ubiquitous surveillance, Internet users employ censorship circumvention software and there are online pressure groups that voice social and economic demands. They are ready and waiting for the technical advances that will give them more options for expressing their views online.

But these improvements are slow in coming. Although they are probably necessary for Syria's economic development, their potential for social destabilisation seems to frighten the authorities, who prefer for the time being to put the emphasis on filtering and repression.

### **Foreign press under close surveillance**

The foreign press is regulated by Decree 50 (2001), which allows the authorities to forbid the circulation of foreign publications if they cover subjects concerning national sovereignty, if they threaten national security or if they violate public decency.

The correspondents of foreign news media are kept under surveillance and find it very hard to obtain accreditation. The pan-Arab satellite TV news station *Al-Jazeera* has never obtained permission to open a permanent bureau.

Reporters Without Borders representatives were denied entry to Syria in September 2008. The information minister said at the time: "They will never get a visa." Reporters Without Borders reiterates its desire to carry out a fact-finding visit to Syria. It would be the organisation's first visit to the country.

At the start of this month, the Syrian authorities arbitrarily closed the bureau of the Italian news agency *ANSA* in the Damascus neighbourhood of Baramkeh for trying to cover the arrests of civil society representatives during the preceding months.

### **Conclusions**

Despite its return to the international stage, Syria has paradoxically become an immense prison. The few remaining areas when Syrians can still exercise some freedom are being steadily eliminated by a government that, like Big Brother, seeks to enclose the entire society in a tight grip.

The regime does not yield to any form of international pressure. We saw this again recently with the arrest and conviction of the opposition lawyer and human rights activist Haytham Al-Maleh and the lawyer Muhannad Al-Hassani. Governments in Europe and North America protested, described their arrests as an act of injustice and called for their release. Assad did not budge an inch. The criticism was dismissed as meddling in Syria's internal affairs.

Is this criticism accompanying a shift in the regional political configuration in the Middle East? Will it spawn a change in the government's attitude to civil society? It is impossible to predict whether such a reorientation will take place. But, at the same time, unpredictability seems to be the only constant in the Syrian regime. You never know, and you can always imagine that it will snow on 17 July in Damascus, and on Adra prison.