

Plagues Neither Friend Nor Foe ...

The State of Freedom of Expression in the Arab World 2019



"Pleases Neither Friend Nor Foe... The State of Freedom of Expression in the Arab World 2019"

Introduction

In ANHRI's Freedom of Expression Annual Report issued in 2009 monitoring freedom of expression in the Arab world during 2008, political "Hesba" lawsuits (cases filed by private parties in the name of protecting state interests) were the predominant form of violation of freedom of expression. Such litigations always target opinion holders, writers and journalists in an attempt to pander to the regime; by filing lawsuits against critics of the government showing hostility towards the views they raised against the regime. These lawsuits are filed by individuals who are mostly seeking a low-cost fame; as a "Hesba" lawsuit that doesn't cost a few pounds can indeed attract the attention of the government-backed newspapers that always rush to shed light on any issue that supports the regime.

Now, in 2019 and after 10 years, it seems that history repeats itself. Political "Hesba" lawsuits have strongly and more severely resurfaced in Egypt, in a way that, ANHRI believes, it aims to satisfy and appease the authorities, if not with their permission.

<http://www.anhri.net/reports/press2008/02.shtml>

This is the situation in Egypt, so does it vary in the other Arab countries?

We don't think so. To state it more accurately, the only difference is in the details.

The new wave of Arab uprisings have been met with extreme violence by the governments, whether in countries that have recently witnessed these revolutions and uprisings, such as Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq, or other countries that saw the start of the first wave of uprisings, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria, not to mention the rest of the Arab countries that fear an expansion of the new wave of uprisings. This violence is represented in the corruption of suppression and the crackdown on dissent and, of course, freedom of expression and freedom of the press are at the forefront of the freedoms being targeted by these Arab governments.

Not a single Arab country has stopped incarcerating opponents in publishing-related cases, even in Tunisia- which is supposed to be an exception- opinion holders have faced detentions as well, although in a way that may be less severe.

Methods of suppression may vary, but what is constant is the hostility towards freedom of expression and freedom of the press. In Kuwait, for example, the government is

hostile most to Twitter, whereas in Egypt, Facebook faces the most severe hostility from the regime. In Saudi Arabia, no one is allowed to voice a different opinion opposing the regime's one. The United Arab Emirates practices all kinds of repression to curb freedom of expression as part of its hostility towards public freedoms and hides such hostility behind mock ministries such as the Ministry of Happiness!!

Following in the footsteps of Egypt, Bahrain uses "the fight against terrorism" as a "legal" pretext to severely crack down on opponents leveling against them terrorism-related charges.

In Morocco, many opinion holders, especially journalists and the Hirak Rif Movement's activists, are being brought to unfair trials that don't meet the most basic rules of justice and due process.

The worst situation is still in Yemen, where journalists and opinion holders are enduring severe violations by the Houthi forces, on the one hand, and the UAE and Saudi-backed government forces headed by President Mansour Hadi, on the other hand.

In Palestine, the situation is not much different, although it is less severe given the fact that the country is under occupation; as the Hamas Authority is restricting the exercise of freedom of expression in areas under its control just as the Palestinian Authority practices repression in territory falling within its jurisdiction.

Examples are too numerous to be cited here, but when you read the report digging deep into its 12 chapters (12 countries), you will find that the situation of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the Arab world, indeed, pleases neither friend nor foe.

Jordan

First: Introduction

The geographical location of Jordan plays a major role in shaping the government's domestic policy and how it interacts with issues of freedom of opinion and expression; as the Kingdom is the epicenter of the conflict with Israeli occupation forces and shares land borders with both Iraq and Syria, the birthplace of ISIS. As for the internal situation, the conflict between the liberal currents that call for modernity and the growing fundamentalist currents that seek to impose their will on the community has played a fundamental role in the decisions made by the Jordanian authorities with regard to the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly throughout 2019 .

The Jordanian government has countered pressure from both Egypt and Saudi Arabia to ban the Muslim Brotherhood group. It further allowed the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, to take part in the parliamentary elections and to have special representation in the Jordanian House of Representatives .

During the past few years, conservative religious currents have imposed their views on society prompting the government to commit some violations against freedom of expression under the pretext of "violating public decency" ,"maintaining the community's customs and traditions" ,"preserving the country's reputation ,"or "insulting religion and the divine entity."

For example, conservative groups have been able to pressure the government to cancel the festival of colors inspired by Indian culture and caused a stir as a hotel declared its intention to organize a foam and pool party for its guests with dinner and a live DJ .(1) Also, Netflix series 'Jinn' has sparked uproar in Jordan since its release on 13 June; for allegedly including" bold "scenes that are" incompatible with Jordan's traditions and values ."Consequently, on June 15, the Parliament issued a statement confirming its endeavor to introduce legislation that would ensure the preservation of the national traditions, morals and values(2) .

Second: Legislative and legal developments

During 2019, Amman witnessed broad controversy and a popular rejection of two proposed laws pertaining to the right of freedom of opinion and expression and the right to information. Human rights organizations and those defending freedom of opinion and expression were able to fend off the process of enacting an amended cybercrime bill, while the Jordanian government was able to pass the 2019 Cybersecurity Law in the Parliament.

On 19 February 2019, the Jordanian Parliament discussed the cybercrime bill. The session concluded with a majority vote in favor of the proposal to refer the bill to the Jordanian government for the purpose of introducing necessary amendments to some articles, especially those related to hate speech and" fake news "penalties.

The draft law, for example, introduces an ambiguous definition of " hate speech ;"as it equates hate speech with permissible/ legitimate criticism of public figures on social media. It also allows the government to confiscate and search personal devices, which would violate the citizens 'right to privacy.

On 11 December 2018, the Jordanian government added new amendments to the draft cybercrime bill of 2015, which it withdrew before sending it back to Parliament for a vote .

As for the draft Cybersecurity Law of 2019 ,(3) the Parliament began on 21 July 2019 its first extraordinary session convened upon a Royal Court statement to discuss the bill. On 30 July, the Parliament endorsed the adoption of the 2019 Cybersecurity Law in preparation for submitting it to the Senate. The law stipulates the establishment of a national council for cyber security as an administrative authority, granting it absolute power to" block, cancel or disable the communication network, information system, information network, communication devices and private electronic messages with any bodies suspected of committing or involved in any cybercrime act ,"which constitutes an infringement on the right to information; since this power should be exclusively granted to the judicial authority that has inherent jurisdiction over such issues .

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

One of the cases that have most affected freedom of speech throughout 2019 is the case of blocking news websites. In March 2019, the Jordanian authorities blocked access to 45 websites based on the Press and Publications Law No. 8 of 1988 and its amendments (Law No. 32 of 2012). Since 2013, the authorities have been using this notorious law to block hundreds of websites. Article 49 of the Law obliges electronic publications, which publish news, investigative reports, articles and comments, to be licensed or to register whereas at the same time all the provisions of the legislation related to press publication are applied to them as well.

Other cases may include: banning the teachers' sit-in staged on September 5 near the prime minister's office in Amman, where security forces arrested more than 50 participants, the teachers union going on an open strike and ensuing solidarity campaign by students and parents, and Al-Ramtha Protests at Irbid City, North of Jordan, which erupted on 23 and 24 August following the government decision to limit the number of cigarettes permitted to enter the country, leading to confrontations between the security forces and protesters and the arrest of dozens of them.

Fourth: Violations of freedom of expression

Banning and obstructing peaceful activities

Among the violations that took place in 2019 was when the Governor of Amman, Saad Shehab announced the cancellation of the first National Conference to Combat Immorality, which was scheduled to be held at the Professional Associations Complex at the invitation of the Jordanian Ansar al-Fadila (Association of the Supporters of Virtue), aka Dera', under the auspices of the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf (endowments) and

Islamic Affairs. The conference was canceled on the pretext that the organizers hadn't obtained the permits to hold the event. Also, Jordan's Gendarmerie and security forces prevented the Detainees' Families and Supporters Committee and other activists from reaching the headquarters of the National Center for Human Rights on the evening of June 2 to hand over a memorandum concerning political detainees and prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom .

On September 5, security forces prevented a group of teachers from staging a sit-in near the prime ministry's office at Fourth Square in central Amman demanding a 50% pay rise. They also arrested more than 50 teachers, 13 of whom were transferred to Al-Bayader Security Center. In response, Jordan's teachers union launched an "open-ended" strike to protest such harsh treatment by the security forces.

Blocking websites/services

The Jordanian authorities continued to pursue their policy of banning news websites, even the websites created by Jordanian youth living abroad, to benefit from the media freedoms in the countries where they reside, were also blocked .

For example, on Sunday 19 March, the authorities banned "Al-Urdunyya" website only one hour after its launch, for allegedly "violating the licensing conditions stipulated in the Press and Publications Law "since it provides news related to Jordan although it is run from outside the country .

Moreover, the Director of the Media Commission's licensing directorate Majd Al Amd announced on the 5th of March the blocking of 45 other websites in the Kingdom.

Assaults

Not only does the government carry out attacks on journalists in Jordan, but also there are some citizens who can do so without any interference from the authorities to stop them. On 3 October 2019, a group of people attacked Roya TV crew while they were covering a protest organized by teachers in the vicinity of the Professional Associations Complex in Amman. The assailants claimed that the crew deliberately tried to cover the protest at its end to show that it had limited participation.

Also in the evening of 23 and 24 August, a group of protesters blocked the road in Ramtha city using stones and burning tires. In response, the security forces fired tear gas to disperse them and arrested some citizens who were on the scene to shoot the incident.

Detention

The Jordanian authorities are trying to restrict the right to freedom of expression by various means, including incarceration of victims, which occupied the largest portion of violations during 2019. For instance, based on the chronological order of incidents, more than 10 people- most of them are affiliated with the "Hirak" Coalition- have been detained on charges violating the right to freedom of expression; such as "insulting the

king") "lengthening the tongue against the king ("or any other vague charges including "undermining the political regime "and" online slander ."

On 2 January 2019, the security services arrested journalist Nidal Salama, before he was transferred to the Correction and Rehabilitation Center to implement a previous three-month prison sentence, for allegedly" violating the Press and Publications Law "against the backdrop of a publishing case relating to a private hospital .Salama was later released, on 5 February 2019, upon the General Amnesty Law.

The security apparatus in Jordan also arrested journalist Jihad Abu Baidar, on April 7, in front of the building of" Jordan Today) "Al-Ordon Al-Yoom) TV channel where he had an interview to talk about the issue counterfeiting gold stamps, before the criminal investigation services released him one day after his detention .

On 19 May, the Amman Public Prosecutor ordered the detention of the" Jordan Today " TV channel's owner Mohammad Aajlouni and the" Aal-Rabe3 "satirical show host Rana Hammuz ;following a complaint filed by the Gendarmerie Department Director General, Hussein Hawatmeh, after the channel broadcasted a video criticizing one of his statements in which he decried a retired military officer's participation in the protests witnessed by the country, accusing him of" either seeking personal gain or being backed by external or foreign bodies."

The security services also arrested lawyer Firas Al-Rousan, on May 22, and decided to detain him for a month on a charge of" lengthening the tongue ,"before ordering his release on June 20. Furthermore, the Public Security Directorate arrested some people who participated in a sit-in near the National Center for Human Rights for allegedly "joining an unauthorized sit-in ,"before releasing them the same day after they had to sign a written undertaking that they wouldn't carry out any acts that disrupt the country's security and order. It's worth mentioning that the crew of" Jordan Today "TV Channel was among the detainees released, including media worker Obaidah Abdo, Ali Khalaf and Qutaiba al-Momani, who were in charge of covering the sit-in .

The list of those detained by the Jordanian security services also includes: Suhaib Nasrallah, Malik Al-Jizawi and Muhammad Ajaj, who were arrested on Thursday 27 June after participating in a protest that denounced the Bahrain workshop in Jordan's Al-Baqa'a Refugee Camp. The three were accused of" insulting an Arab sister-country using offensive chants."

Trials

The trial of activists and opinion leaders has been one of the methods used by the Jordanian authorities to restrict freedom of expression, and the charge of" lengthening the tongue "is still one of the prefabricated charges pressed against whoever opposes, criticizes, or complains of poor living conditions. To name but a few, the year of 2019 witnessed the following :

On 9 May, the Amman Criminal Court sentenced activist Taha Al-Dakamseh to one year in prison on a charge of" lengthening the tongue ",while it is still presiding over the case of Ali Khuraisat on similar charges .

On 10 May, Amman's Public Prosecutor ordered the detention of Hirak Movement-affiliated activist Ahmed Al-Naimat, for allegedly "lengthening the tongue and defaming an official body" and on 10 June 2019, the Amman Criminal Court ordered his release on bail after he served an entire month in prison .

Amman's Public Prosecutor also decided, on 2 September, to detain the head of the Arab Organization for Human Rights and Struggle against Torture, Abdul Karim Al-Sharida for 14 days in Juwaida prison on a charge of "lengthening the tongue" against the backdrop of a video he posted on his Facebook account, in which he criticized the Royal Court's interference in the nomination of tribal elders, before he was released on bail on 11 September of the same year .

Fifth: Most common accusations against freedom of expression

Many opinion leaders in Jordan have been brought to trial by authorities over several accusations that are commonly used to curb freedom of expression. These accusations, which are not in line with the speech of transforming the country to a civil state, include "lengthening the tongue", "undermining the political regime", "defaming an official body", "insulting an Arab sister-country with chants", "libel and defamation", and "breaching the licensing conditions stipulated in the Press and Publication Law ."

The term of "not obtaining the necessary permits by the event's organizers" has been also used as a justification to prevent the holding of events, conferences and seminars which don't please the authorities .

Sixth: Victims

The list of victims involves social media and Hirak Movement activists, including: Ahmed Tabanja Al-Kinani, Ahmed Al-Naimat, Sabri Al-Mashaa'la, Suhaib Nasrallah, Taha Al-Daqamseh, Abdullah Al-Wreikat, Ali Khuraisat, Firas Al-Rousan, Kamil Al-Zoubi, Muawiya Al-Shawawreh, Naim Abu Rudeina, Malik Al-Jizawi, Muhammad Ajaj, and some teachers who participated in the September 5 Protests that took place in Amman's Fourth Square .

This is in addition to some media professionals and journalists, including: director Mohammad Aajlouni, TV host Rana Hammuz, and journalists Nidal Salama, Jihad Abu Baidar, Obaida Abdo, Ali Khalaf and Qutaiba Al-Momani, along with Roya TV crew who covered the teachers' sit-in which took place in 3 October 2019 .

The list also involves human rights defenders such as Abdul Karim Al-Sharida, the President of the Arab Organization for Human Rights and Struggle against Torture .

Footnotes

1. A report entitled "The 'foam of the beach' party stirs controversy... Activists: We do not want bold practices" -Published on: 11 July 2019- Last accessed date: 20

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<https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2019/07/11/1258299.html>

2. A statement issued by Parliament -"Published on: 15 June 2019- Last accessed date: 20 October 2019 -<http://representatives.jo/?q=ar-اخبار/بيان-صادر-عن-مجلس-النواب-1>
3. Cybersecurity draft law- Published on the Jordanian Parliament website on June 1 - Last accessed date: 20 October 2019 -
<http://representatives.jo/sites/default/files/Color0017.pdf>

Egypt

Introduction

The annual report of freedom of opinion and expression in Egypt monitors five main pillars while clarifying the path of democracy in each of them, in addition to the landmark incidents that took place during the year 2019 and have affected freedoms in general. The report begins with monitoring the referendum on the constitutional amendments held in early 2019, outlining the most important amended articles and the major events that occurred concurrently with the referendum process. The report tackles the changes that occurred in the Egyptian legislation regarding freedom of opinion and expression. It also gives a detailed view of the situation of the press in Egypt; in terms of the violations committed against journalists, the raid of media institutions and the blocking of websites, besides giving a closer look at the legislative status of the media in Egypt and its related incidents that occurred in 2019. The report is divided into several sections monitoring, with details and dates, all the incidents pertaining to the situation of the press and media in the country.

The report then monitors the major incidents that took place throughout 2019, most prominently "September 20 Protests", and concludes with listing a number of state security cases that are related to freedom of speech along with the military trials of civilians that were convened during the year. On the whole, the report reveals how the situation of freedoms in Egypt has considerably deteriorated and how the regime is moving towards a very dark tunnel particularly with regard to freedom of opinion and expression.

First: Legislative and legal developments

The constitutional amendments

- On 14 February 2019, the Parliament approved in principle, by a majority of 80%, a proposal to amend the Constitution.
- On 14 April 2019, the Parliament approved 25 proposals for the constitutional amendments, including adding, replacing or omitting certain articles.
- The most important constitutional amendments include: the extension of the presidential term to six years, the formation of the so-called "Council of Senators" granting it consultative powers, the re-creation of the post of "vice president", and the increase of the representation of women and minorities in parliament and local councils.

The amendments also entail other articles which would expand the President's power by giving him the authority to appoint: the heads of judicial bodies, head judges, the Public Prosecutor, the chief justice for the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC), and the head of SCC's Commissioners' Authority and its members. The constitutional amendments also provide for the establishment of a supreme council for the judicial bodies and organizations headed by the President of the Republic.

No voice is louder than "Yes"

Since the first of January 2019 until the adoption of the constitutional amendments in April, opponents had faced a fierce crackdown for voicing their objection to the amendments; as they were banned from appearing on media and from holding any activities calling for rejecting the referendum:

- On 23 February, the authorities arrested four members of the Dostour Party; Gamal Fadel, Ahmed al-Rassam, Ramadan Abu Zeid and Helal Samir, along with dissident and former Shura Council member Mohamed Mohieldin, after announcing their rejection of the constitutional amendments.
- Some opponents, such as actors Khaled Abul Naga and Amr Waked, faced legal cases accusing them of "spreading false news, high treason, and insulting and inciting against the Egyptian state". The two had their membership at the Egyptian Actors' Syndicate revoked, after they met with members of the US Congress to discuss the human rights situation and the future of democracy in Egypt. Other opponents, including prominent dissident Hamdeen Sabahi and writer Alaa Al-Aswany, faced smear campaigns after voicing their objection to the constitutional amendments.
- On 28 March, the "Civil Democratic Movement" was banned from organizing a rally in front of the Egyptian parliament to protest against constitutional amendments.

Amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Law

- Amendments were made to the Anti-Terrorism Law No. 94 of 2015 twice; the first time in February 2019 and the second in May 2019. The amended law provides for the confiscation of assets, real estate (property), money, weapons, ammunition, tools, documents, or any other auxiliary means, besides the penalty established for whoever commits a crime or offense classified as 'terrorism'.
- The amendments also stipulated that the Public Prosecution may temporarily close any place that was used or prepared for use by a terrorist or terrorist group.
- According to this law, the lessor (anyone will lease a property to another person) could face one-year imprisonment and pay a fine of EGP 5,000-EGP 10,000, if he didn't provide the police with copies of the rental contract and the tenant's ID within 72 hours of signing the contract or residing in the property (whichever is sooner), and as for the foreign tenant, the lessor should provide a copy of the foreign renter's passport.

The draft law regulating the civil society (NGO draft Law)

- It was passed on 14 July 2019 igniting the ire of independent civil society organizations rejecting its circumvention of the provisions of Article (75) of the Egyptian Constitution, which stipulates that civil society associations can be established upon notification only. But this draft law has transformed the notification process into a de facto licensing process; by making the acquisition of a legal personality conditional on the lack of objection from the administrative

entity and conditional upon a letter from that entity to banks, allowing associations to open accounts (Article 11).

- The proposed bill also follows the current law in suspending the notification process for civic associations in border regions, instead requiring them to obtain a prior permit with governor approval (Article 15).
- The NGOs draft law enables the curtailment of civic activity by requiring prior approval of all foreign funding and international grants. The state can therefore cripple any association by denying funding approval, and the bill does not require the state to provide reasons for its rejection of funding (Article 28).
- The draft bill classifies associations' funds as public money (Article 24, last paragraph), subject to the oversight of the Central Auditing Authority.

Third: Violations against freedom of expression

The situation of the press and media

All news websites, newspapers and TV satellite channels are under government control and most of the independent websites, despite its scarcity, have been blocked. This clearly gives a manifestation of the situation of journalism, media, and freedom of expression in the country. The year 2019 has witnessed a clear deterioration of the situation of journalists and the press in Egypt, owing to the enactment of notorious legislation that makes journalists vulnerable to several violations, including:

Legalized muzzling of the press

- Enactment of a sanctions list of the Law Regulating the Press and Media

In March 2019, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) issued a list of sanctions/ regulations (1) which has been met with fierce backlash by civil society organizations, journalists, and members of the Journalists Syndicate's board along with many others who are concerned with press freedom; given its unjust penalties and the use of loose and vaguely-worded phrases. For example, Article (17) thereof states that: "Whoever uses or permits the use of phrases or words that call for or incite violence, hatred, discrimination, sectarianism, racism, or harm state institutions or the general interests of the state, will be punished by; either a suspension of the publication or the program, or by blocking of the website or portal, temporarily or permanently, or by a fine of no less than 250,000 Egyptian pounds and no more than 500,000 Egyptian pounds."

Critics of the sanctions list also noted that it circumvents the powers granted to the journalists and media workers' syndicates, as shown in articles 7 and 8, in addition to article 16 which flagrantly encroaches on the powers of the judiciary as it provides for the investigation of crimes that are only handled by judicial bodies.

Violations against the press and journalists

The number of imprisoned journalists in 2019

As monitored by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), the number of jailed journalists, who work in the field of journalism, has amounted to 39 (2), in addition to 17 new imprisoned cases recorded only in 2019.

The number of blocked/closed websites in 2019

The number of websites that have been blocked so far has reached over 500, with a remarkable increase in the list during 2019, as follows:

- In February 2019, the Egyptian authorities blocked 37,000 websites in an apparent bid to stamp out the "Batel" (Void) opposition campaign that was gathering signatures against the constitutional amendments, according to network data from NetBlocks internet observatory.
- In May 2019, Al-Tahrir newspaper website was blocked, which affected its budget leaving it at high- risk of insolvency. The newspaper's management announced they attempted to resolve the issue with the government, but they haven't received any response up to the present. Consequently, the management resorted to cut the salaries of the newspaper's employees, a matter that created a dispute within the institution prompting many employees to stage a sit-in to protest the reduction of their salary.
- In September 2019, following the September 20 anti-government demonstrations, the Arabic versions of BBC Arabic and Al-Hurra websites were blocked. The authorities also blocked Cloudflare, a service that protects users from cyberattacks including the ban.
- Network data from NetBlocks internet observatory showed disruption to some of Facebook content servers. The network data also indicated that approximately 40% of Twitter users are experiencing difficulty connecting at any given time, which is consistent with social media users' complaints regarding Facebook Messenger.
- Later on, ARIJ, a website specialized in investigative journalism that covers the Arab region, was blocked. "7iber" website was also blocked after it published a news story covering the arrest of two Jordanian young men, who appeared to have links with the September 20 protests in Egypt.
- The Egyptian authorities also tried to block access to Wire messaging app and Facebook Messenger, in addition to their repeated attempts to block Facebook and Twitter, which sometimes led to the blocking of the two websites in a specific geographical area. The Egyptian authorities' practices also included "throttling" slowing down access to social networking websites and instant messaging applications, most notably Wicker and Signal.

Raids on media institutions and suspension of publication

- Confiscation of newspapers

On 21 March, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) issued a decision, pursuant to the sanctions list regulating the press and media, to block the website of al-Mashhad newspaper for six months and ordered the newspaper to pay a fine of EGP 50,000. The SCMR based its decision on allegations that al-Mashhad defamed an actress

through publication of pornographic images, which the newspaper totally denied and asked the council for clarification. The newspaper's editor-in-chief also said that SCMR seemed that it had checked a website other than al-Mashhad.

On 30 May, Al Ahali newspaper, issued by El Tagamou' party, was banned from publication for the third week; after the newspaper published an investigative report about the number of convicts who were released upon presidential pardons. Consequently, El Tagamou' party issued a statement condemning the ban calling it a kind of "censorship that violates the constitution and freedom of publication." (3)

- The raid on Mada Masr's headquarters

On 24 November, Mada Masr (blocked) website issued a statement detailing the raid on its headquarters, saying that security forces stormed its office, held the staff for hours inside the premises and detained three senior journalists, before releasing them several hours later. (4)

The following day, the Public Prosecution said in a statement (5) that the security raid occurred under a judicial direction and a search warrant from the Supreme State Security Prosecution, after receiving an investigations file by National Security Services, which reported that Muslim Brotherhood established Mada's website for "circulating false news and rumors to disturb the public security."

- Suspension of TV channels and media workers

- On 4 February 2019, Khaled Lutfi, the owner of the "Tanmia" publishing house, was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of "revealing military secrets and spreading rumors" after distributing "The Angel" book, which was banned from publishing in Egypt. The movie which is based on the book and carries the same name was also banned because it portrays Ashraf Marwan, the son-in-law of the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser, claiming that he was a spy for Israeli intelligence agency.

- On 25 May, Egypt's Media Syndicate decided to suspend TV host Basma Wahba, presenter of "Sheik al-Hara" program, for airing two episodes that stirred controversy. The Syndicate had announced her suspension before the Supreme Media Council decided on the complaints issued against her, on the grounds that "Wahba" is not a union member and therefore does not have the right to appear on the airwaves as a host.

- On 4 August, Al-Mehwar Satellite Channel announced the termination of its contact with the president of Zamalek sporting club to broadcast "Zamalek Today" program, which was scheduled to be aired until January 2020. The channel said in a statement that it wanted to end the contract because of the damage it incurred as a result of broadcasting the program, adding that the program had been ordered to be suspended twice before. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation had previously ordered the program to pay a fine of EGP 50,000 because of what the council called violation of media standards.

- On 28 August, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation also banned TV presenter Riham Saeed from appearing on media for a year over comments deemed "offensive" to overweight women in Egypt, which prompted Al-Hayah TV Network to suspend her talk show "Sabaya".

- On 4 December, TeN TV channel announced that it would stop broadcasting by the end of December 2019 due to financial reasons and lack of advertisements on its screens.

- Increasing prices of national newspapers

Egypt's National Press Authority (NPA) announced in a statement a one-pound-increase in the price of daily and weekly newspapers in order to "make up for the losses press institutions incur". It's worth mentioning that Egypt's print newspapers in general witnessed great losses due to lack of demand compared to the popularity of digital media.

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

The year of 2019 witnessed a clear deterioration in the situation of human rights defenders; as it witnessed 56 jail verdicts and pretrial detention decisions against human rights defenders (HRDs) and advocates of freedom of opinion and expression in particular. It also saw manifold violations against human rights activists and defenders, such as: travel bans, financial confiscations and seizure of funds, and physical assaults in addition to defamation, public death threats, pretrial arrests and forced disappearance, among many other violations monitored by ANHRI in a separate report on the situation of HRDs in 2019, which it described as "more than difficult" ⁽⁶⁾.

September 20 Protests

The year of 2019 witnessed scattered protests organized by all political forces in Egypt in what is known in the media as "September 20 protests", before the security forces dispersed them arresting thousands of citizens in connection to the protests. In the evening of 20 September 2019, many political activists simultaneously staged 25 protest events all over 19 governorates, most prominently: Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Damietta, Gharbyia, Daqahlyia, Aswan, and Qena. These nationwide and non-politicized protests were characterized by their extraordinary size and geographical reach, as they were participated by different groups of political leaders with different affiliations, in response to a specific call from actor Mohamed Ali.

In hit-and-run confrontations, protesters continued to clash with the security forces from 8 pm until about midnight, when violence was intensified by the security that heavily fired tear gas canisters at protesters, and arrested many of them in a large-scale arrest campaigns all over Egypt's provinces and governorates, which led to the detention of more than 4,000 people, many at random from the surrounding streets.

The repercussions of the September 20 Protests

- On September 20 and 21 until the afternoon of September 22, human rights organizations continued to receive around the clock reports on a huge number of people being kidnapped from the streets and homes, as security forces had dramatically escalated mass arrests of citizens. Then, in the afternoon of September 22, the first batch of “September detainees” appeared in the prosecution headquarters, pending case No. 1338 of 2019. The number of those arrested amounted to approximately 3,000 people (7), as we estimated having contacted their families. However, an official statement from the Office of the Public Prosecutor stated that “only 1,000 people” had been interrogated in relation to their participation in the protests. Many of the detainees held pending the aforementioned case had started to be released over time.
- However, after several weeks, lawyers were surprised to find that a number of their clients had been added to another case, No. 1413 of 2019 State Security, and until this moment, many defendants are being recycled in new cases without a clear mechanism.
- All of the defendants who had been held in the case known in the media as “September grip” were subjected to several violations, starting from their detention in illegal places- including Central Security camps- to the physical assault, beatings and torture many of them endured, especially the defendants of Suez governorate, not to mention the denial of visitation, especially those who were detained at Port Said Prison.
- The Egyptian government had launched a nationwide crackdown amid a large-scale arrest campaign against the Egyptian opposition, including human rights defenders, politicians, journalists and lawyers.

Fourth: Victims

Opinion-related cases before the State Security Prosecution

- The number of cases that have been considered before the State Security Prosecution during 2019 amounts to 1,800, with more than dozens of defendants in each case, while one of these cases include about 3,000 defendants. The charges leveled against defendants in most of these cases include: "spreading false news, misusing social media, joining a terrorist group".
- The number of journalists who have been added to the list of imprisoned journalists during 2019 is 17, in addition to 32 human rights defenders added to the prisoners' list, all of whom are being detained pending state security cases.
- Among the most prominent detainees during the year are: human rights defenders Alaa Abdel-Fattah, lawyer Mohamed Al-Baqir, journalists Khaled Dawoud and Israa Abdel-Fattah, academic Dr. Hassan Nafaa, and publisher Khaled Loutfi who was sentenced to five years in prison upon a military ruling.

Footnotes

1. A news report on 'Al-Watan' website, entitled "Supreme Media Council issues a list of sanctions for its institutions"- published on March 18, 2019- Last accessed date: December 2019- <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/4072499?fbclid=IwAR3n37CX8M3SXru9w13Xier6eXzzlt64eNRABluLor129gcizu3idGsk0rA> Reviewed December 2019

2. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), A list of the imprisoned journalists and media workers in Egypt- Last accessed date: December 2019- https://www.anhri.info/?post_type=journalist

3. Al-Ahaly newspaper- "Who stands behind the repeated confiscation of Al- Ahaly newspaper?"- Published on June 5, 2019- Last accessed date: December 2019-
<http://altagamo.org/2019/06/05/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A/>
<http://altagamo.org/2019/06/05/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A/> DAM As of December 2019.

4. "Mada Masr" website, a news report entitled "Hours after the raid on Mada Masr, the security forces release Shadi Zalat, Lina Atallah, Muhammad Hamama, and Rana Mamdouh"- Published on November 24, 2019- Last accessed date: December 2019- <https://mada22.appspot.com/madamasr.com/ar/2019/11/24/news/u/%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%af-%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%82%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%85%d8%af%d9%89-%d9%85%d8%b5%d8%b1-%d8%a3%d8%ac%d9%87%d8%b2%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3/> accessed December 2019

5. "Al-Masry Al-Youm website"- A news report entitled "Public Prosecutor on the raid of Mada Masr: National Security investigations prove its affiliation with the MB"- published on November 25, 2019- Last accessed date: December 2019- <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1446574> Visited December 2019.

6. ANHRI's website- A report entitled "More than difficult"- Published on December 10, 2019- Last accessed date: December 2019- <https://www.anhri.info/?p=12971>

7. We could not confirm the number because the State Security Prosecution doesn't allow lawyers to have access to case's papers

Lebanon

First: Introduction

"All means all" is one of the main slogans chanted in Lebanon's demonstrations that broke out on 17 October 2019. The extraordinary size and geographic reach of these protests means that, for the first time in the country's history, the Lebanese people mobilized to cross any sectarian lines or differences as they stood united against the entire political class, which is responsible for the deterioration of political and economic conditions, after the government announced plans to impose new taxes on gasoline, tobacco and voice-over-internet calls. The protests' slogan indicates that the calls for ending the country's sectarian-based regime, and relying on "capability and specialization in public jobs, the judiciary, the military, security, public, and joint institutions, and in the independent agencies" have become a national demand amid the sectarian tensions that threaten the national state.

The sectarian divisions in public jobs have negatively affected the human rights situation in Lebanon. Also, the country's geographical proximity with the Israeli occupation forces serves as a cover to suppress freedom of opinion and expression. On the other hand, media institutions in Lebanon have suffered from a suffocating financial crisis due to the weak advertising production industry because of the high printing costs, which prompted Joseph Kousseifi - Head of the Press Editors Syndicate, to demand a legislative session on media-related laws to introduce a new modern media law .

Second: Legislative and legal developments

Lebanon didn't witness any legislative changes pertaining to freedom of opinion and expression during 2019 .⁽¹⁾ However, under pressure from nationwide protests that swept the country, the government adopted on 21 October, in an official document, a package of resolutions to contain the crisis, including; abolishing the Ministry of Information no later than 30 November 2019, drafting laws that seek to restore stolen public funds and establishing an anti-corruption committee by the end of the year.⁽²⁾

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

Freedom of expression in Lebanon has been affected by a number of issues that garnered widespread press attention, both in Lebanon and the Arab world. On October 17, Byblos International (music) Festival announced that it had dropped from its line-up a concert by Mashrou 'Leila pop band, which was scheduled to take place in Byblos, North Lebanon on August 9, following fierce backlash that reached to death threats from Christian groups claiming that the band's songs "insult Christianity" . "Another critical issue was the Lebanese Ministry of Labor's decision to activate labor laws that oblige all foreign workers, including Palestinians, to acquire the necessary work permits that would grant them the legal status to work in the country.

Fourth: Violations of freedom of expression

Prevention from work/Ban

The Lebanese authorities had prevented a number of festive and music activities under the pretext of "insulting religions", "having ties to Israel", or "breaching Sharia rules".

For instance, Lebanon's General Security office barred the International Brazilian Metal Band "Sepultura" from entering the country to perform a concert in Beirut on the 28th of April, over the band's alleged "insults towards Christianity" and "past support of Israel"; claiming that the band members are devil worshipers, had previously performed in Israel and that they filmed a video clip supporting Israel.

Also, on July 16, the Lebanese security forces prevented a march for Palestinian refugees, organized by Palestinian institutions and societies operating in Lebanon, from heading to the parliament headquarters in the capital Beirut, in protest against the Ministry of Labor's decision to compel Palestinian workers to obtain official work licenses to be able to work legally in Lebanese territory.

Furthermore, on July 30, Byblos International Festival announced the cancellation of Mashrou'Leila pop band's performance, which was scheduled for August 9, following threats to kill the festival's fans over claims that the band's songs "insult Christianity".

The financial crisis witnessed by Lebanon has also played a clear role in closing Lebanon's old newspapers and television channels. For example, Lebanon's former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the head of the Future Movement (FM) Saad al-Hariri announced, on September 18, the suspension of work at his "Future" TV satellite television channel for the same financial reasons that led to the closing of Al-Mustaqbal (Future) newspaper.

Censorship

The role of censorship became clear through the Lebanese General Security's intervention to remove pictures or topics from foreign newspapers that are being distributed and operating in the country. For instance, on 7 February 2019, a caricature by the Italian cartoonist, Marco de Angelis, was censored by the Lebanese authorities for depicting the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei with lightning bolts coming out of his head, seemingly zapping protesters around him. The cartoon was banned from the February 7 issue of the French weekly "Courrier International" after it was covered by gray non-transparent stickers.

Blocking websites/services

Lebanon's Ministry of Communications used the policy of blocking websites to crackdown on critical voices and to attempt to appease conservative groups. On 21 April 2019, the Lebanese authorities blocked "This is Lebanon.org" website specializing in documenting violations against foreign workers in Lebanon. Also, on May 24, upon the Public Prosecution's approval, the Director General of Investment and Maintenance at the Ministry of Communications, Bassel Al Ayoubi, ordered the blocking of the popular gay dating application Grindr, which is widely used by the LGBT+ community.

Assaults

Journalists, social media activists and protesters had been subjected to a large-scale during the year, either by the security forces or by members of different Lebanese sects. For example, Lebanese satellite channel Al-Jadeed TV's headquarters was the target of an attack by unknown assailants who threw a hand grenade at the building from a four-wheel drive vehicle before they fled the scene. No one was harmed in the blast, which damaged the channel's building and the nearby cars.

In another incident, a number of journalists were beaten, verbally abused, and had their cameras broken while they were covering the funeral of the late George Zureik, on February 9, in front of the Church of St. Barbara in Ras Masqa in Koura.

Richard Sammour, a photographer for the local daily Al-Joumhouria also reported being attacked, kicked and punched by some young people belonging to the Lebanese Democratic Party, while he was covering security events in Khaldeh town, south of Beirut, although he showed his press card .

During the peaceful demonstrations that have plagued various Lebanese territories since October 17, the media documented numerous violations against the right to peaceful protest and against media workers while doing their job covering protests. For instance, Hezbollah and Amal movement supporters attacked, on October 29, anti-government protesters with sticks at Riad al-Solh and Martyrs Squares in Beirut, in conjunction with the Lebanese Prime Minister announcing his resignation. The attacker also assaulted the crew of the local satellite channel MTV, which led to the interruption of its broadcast.

Detention

Imprisonment is one of the methods used by the Lebanese authorities to silence mouths and suppress freedom of opinion and expression in Lebanon. For example, on Monday, 13 May 2019, the judicial police arrested dual Lebanese-American citizen Adnan Farhat from Habboush area, Nabatieh Governorate, after he expressed his anger at Lebanese politicians in general and criticized in particular Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and his family on Whatsapp. Farhat was released on bail of 500 thousand Lebanese pounds (about 330 US dollars) after spending two days in detention.

On May 18, the Public Prosecutor issued an arrest warrant against the head of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers Beshara al-Asmar, over his remarks made about late Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, shortly before a press conference at the Confederation's headquarters on the afternoon of May 17.

In violation of the publishing laws, the General Security arrested the young man, Mohamed Wahba, at Beirut International Airport on July 18, before he was handed over to the intelligence services to be tried before the military judiciary on charges of ; "insulting and slandering the president of the republic accusing him of treason "and publishing comments on social media that would" stir up sectarian strife ."On 30 July, the permanent military court declared it had no jurisdiction over Wahba's trial .

Trials

Among the most repressive methods to curb freedom of expression in Lebanon is represented in the complaints and cases that had been brought either by the Public Prosecution or Intelligence Services during 2019 .For example, lawyer Ziyad Hobeish and his wife Lieutenant Colonel Suzan Hajj, former head of the Anti-Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau, had both filed a lawsuit before Beirut Publications Court against " Al-Mustaqbal "TV, the " Future Web "and correspondent Nahid Yusef accusing them of" fabricating crimes of libel, slander and defamation and false news ,"after the respondents published several reports about the prosecution of Suzan Hajj on a charge of" fabricating a case of spying for Israel against artist Ziad Itani" .

In another case, the presiding criminal judge in Beirut issued, on July 24, a decision obliging artist Mohammad Iskandar and his son poet and composer Fares Iskandar to omit the phrase" Housing Banque "from a song dubbed 'Where did you get that from' song. Consequently, on July 29, the Appeal Public Prosecution Office in Mount Lebanon filed a lawsuit against Iskandar, his son, and video producer Wissam Kayal on charges of "libel, slander and defamation ,"before it referred them to the Publications Appeal Court in Baabda.

In August 2019, the board of Dar Al-Sayyad publishing house filed a lawsuit- before the Anti-Cybercrime Bureau- against its representative in the Press Syndicate Council, George Traboulsi accusing him of" libel and defamation ,"after he posted on his Facebook page a picture of the Said Freiha blaming his sons of the publishing house's poor conditions, a matter that the house's managers deemed" offensive "to them .

In the same context, the editor-in-chief of the" Nidaa Al-Watan "newspaper, Bechara Charbel, is being tried before the Publications Court on charges of" slandering and insulting presidents "against the backdrop of an article published ,on September 12, in the newspaper's headline titled" New ambassadors in Baabda... Welcome to Khamenei's Republic ."Charbel's case is still underway as of the time of writing this report .

Additionally, the Beirut Court of Appeal ruled, on October 4, to fine Lebanese journalist Fida Itani a total of 2 million Lebanese pounds as compensation to the plaintiff for the damages incurred. It also obliged him to pay all fees and expenses in the libel lawsuit filed by Hezbollah's liaison and coordination unit chief, Hajj Wafiq, against the backdrop of an article Itani wrote and published on his blog" Godo told us."

A group of Lebanese lawyers launched, on October 8, a legal case against The Economist magazine, accusing it of" sullyng Lebanon's reputation its financial standing "in addition to" showing contempt to Lebanon famous cedar tree falling off the red and white background of the Lebanese flag ,"after it published an article tackling the country's poor economic situation and how it is susceptible to breakdown, accompanied by a photo of the Lebanese flag falling apart and the cedar falls from it .

Also, on October 16, a number of media workers filed a lawsuit before the Public Prosecution in Mount-Lebanon against media professional Maria Maalouf accusing her of" :insulting religious rituals, violating the sanctity of martyrs, fabricating crimes, and inciting to sectarian strife, conflict between sects, conspiracy, sedition, libel and

defamation , "after she posted tweets on social media, in which she likened Hezbollah to "ISIS ."

Intimidation

Intimidation has been widely used by Lebanese authorities to suppress dissidents, as it was used before by different sects against each other. For instance, in a move aimed at spreading fear among journalists in Al-Akhbar newspaper ,Security forces stormed into the Al-Akhbar office in the Concorde Building in Beirut, on May 9, and requested from the management the footage of the CCTV cameras. The raid was a response to the newspaper's publication of leaked diplomatic cables between the Lebanese Embassy in Washington, D.C., and the Lebanese Foreign Ministry. LBCI TV channel's media professional Dima Sadiq was also subjected to violent attacks and smear campaigns as well as threats of rape, after she reopened the debate on the Mount Lebanon's Hadath municipality decision to ban the sale of Christian homes in the area or to rent them to any other sect .

For the third year in a row, organizers of Beirut Pride, an association supporting LGBT+ rights in Lebanon, canceled on September 25 the opening concert of an event, following threats and pressure from religious institutions in addition to reports and statements from security authorities threatening the event participants with violence.

Fifth: Most accusations against freedom of expression

Following are the most common charges used to restrict freedom of expression in Lebanon during 2019: insulting and slandering the president of the republic accusing him of treason, stirring sectarian strife, fabricating false news, insulting and defaming presidents, sullyng Lebanon's reputation its financial standing ,showing contempt to Lebanon famous cedar tree of the Lebanese flag, insulting religious rituals, violating the sanctity of martyrs, fabricating crimes, and inciting to sectarian strife, conflict between sects, conspiracy, sedition, libel and defamation, and having links with Israel .

Sixth: Victims

Victims of freedom of expression in Lebanon in 2019 included those who participated in demonstrations, protests and sit-ins including that of Riad al-Solh and Martyrs Squares in Beirut and the Palestinians sit-in, in addition to: Mashrou 'Leila pop band, organizers of Beirut Pride supporting LGBT+ rights ,Brazilian Metal Band" Sepultura , "Italian cartoonist, Marco de Angelis. The list also included a group of journalists, media professionals and artists such as: Richard Sammour, a photographer for the local daily Al-Joumhouria, MTV crew, journalists George Traboulsi, Bechara Charbel, and Fida Itani, and media workers Maria Maalouf, Dima Sadiq, and Yazbek Wahba, and artists Mohamed Iskandar, his son poet and composer Fares Iskandar and video producer Wissam Kayal, in addition to the head of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers Beshara al-Asmar, Moahmed Wahba and citizen Adnan Farhat (from Habboush .(

Palestine

Introduction

The Palestinians' exercise of their right to freedom of opinion and expression under occupation has been influenced by manifold internal and external factors, among which are legal, political or economic factors. These factors involve the deteriorating relations between the Israeli occupation authorities and the Palestinian Authority (PA), coupled with the conflict between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, not to mention the overlapping and multi-pronged pressure whether it is domestic, regional, or international. All these factors affect the structure of media institutions in Palestine and the ability of citizens to exercise their human rights in the public sphere. Both authorities in the West Bank and Gaza seek to silence citizens if they attempt to speak out, complain, or protest against the poor economic conditions they live in. The two authorities that run the country disagreed over the way to confront the Israeli occupation, but they agreed to suppress freedom of expression in Palestine.

As for the external factors that have affected freedom of expression throughout 2019, the Israeli occupation authority adopted a package of laws in 2018 withholding from the tax revenues it transfers to the PA funds equal to the amount allocated by the PA to Palestinian prisoners and families of Palestinians killed in confrontations with Israel.

A few days earlier, the Palestinian Authority was also deprived of the US aid under the "Taylor Force" Act (TFA). The impact of the economic crisis in Palestine was also noticeable in the suspension of the publication of the leading Palestinian newspaper Al-Quds for the first time in 68 years, due to financial reasons.

First: Legislative and legal developments

Due to the suspension of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)'s operations upon a decision by the Constitutional Court (the highest judicial authority) to dissolve the council- elected since 2006 when the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) won a majority of its seats-, the country didn't witness the enactment of any laws that might restrict the right to freedom of opinion and expression. However, there is still a number of Israeli and Palestinian laws that curb freedom of thought and expression that remain in force, including Decree Law No. 10 of 2018 on Cybercrime.

Second: Violations against freedom of expression

*** Prevention from work/Ban**

The Israeli occupation authorities, along with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and Hamas in Gaza, have all sought to silence citizens and prevent them from voicing their views. This can be evident in many documented incidents; including, but not limited to, the Israeli occupation authorities barring the two US congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from their official visits to Palestine on August 15, after they expressed support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement against Israel and

its settlement project in the Palestinian territories calling for boycotting Israeli goods and products.

In another incident, the Israeli forces raided, in the morning of 21 March, the French Cultural Center in the occupied east Jerusalem region to cancel an event organized by the "Jerusalem Girls" Association; under the pretext that it is funded and supervised by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Also, on 22 July, the occupation forces prevented journalists from entering Wadi al-Hummus neighborhood in Sur Baher village, declaring it as a closed military zone.

On the same day (July 22), the Israeli occupation forces detained Nawal Hijazi, "Al Kufiyya" TV reporter, along with the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC)'s reporter Rose Al-Zrou, for two hours in a coastal area near Wadi al-Hummus neighborhood in Jerusalem; in order to ban them from covering the demolition of Palestinian buildings and homes.

On 15 January 2019, the authority in Ramallah detained journalists Mu'tasim Saqf Al-Heit and Mohammed Karout Adkaidek, a day later, to prevent them from covering protests rejecting the Social Security Law. Also, Hamas' attorney general ruled, on 27 May, to ban the distribution of Al-Hayat Al-Jadida newspaper in the Gaza Strip; for allegedly "publishing materials that promote sedition and incitement to attack public property."

Hamas security forces also attacked, on 14 March, journalist Sami Issa, editorial director of "Al-Hadaf" News website, and confiscated his mobile phone to prevent him from covering the so-called "Down to the High Prices" movement.

* Detention

Administrative detention is one of the methods used by the authorities in Palestine to suppress dissidents and critics. For example, on 3 March, a huge number of Palestinian intelligence personnel raided the house of journalist Hazem Nasser in the occupied city of Tulkarm before arresting him at dawn.

Fayez Al-Suwaiti, who heads a group called "Hand in Hand toward a Homeland Free of Corruption", was also detained shortly after he headed to the Public Prosecutor's Office in the morning of June 9 upon an oral summons. Al-Suwaiti's arrest came after he accused the head of the PA's General Authority of Civil Affairs of financial corruption and misuse of power.

In mid-March, the security forces arrested dozens of journalists from separate areas of the Gaza Strip after summoning most of them for investigation over their coverage of the "We Want to Live" popular youth movement.

* Trial

The Israeli authorities used the judiciary in an attempt to stifle the voices demanding the rights of the Palestinian people. For instance, on 16 April, an Israeli court in the occupied Jerusalem upheld the Israeli government's order to deport Omar Shakir,

director of Human Rights Watch's office in Palestine, alleging that he is one of those who support the boycott of Israeli settlements.

On Monday, 9 September 2019, poet Widad al-Barghouthi, a lecturer at Bir Zeit University, appeared before the "Ofar" Military Court over charges including "incitement against the occupation by publishing poems on the social networking website Facebook". The case, however, had been adjourned at the time.

On the other hand, the "Ofar" Military Court sentenced Palestinian writer Israa Lafi- a resident Surif town, northwest of al-Khalil province in the West Bank- to 10 months in prison for her media and public activities supporting the Palestinians' rights.

* Blocking websites/services

On 6 March, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed a decree designating Hamas-controlled "Al-Aqsa" TV station as a "terrorist organization", after the Israel's Security Agency, commonly known as "Shabak" or "Shin Bet", alleged that Hamas "uses the channel to recruit new agents to its ranks through transmitting secret and agreed upon codes".

The financial crisis suffered by the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip also played a pivotal role in prompting the Hamas mouthpiece "Al-Risala" to announce the suspension of its publication.

* Intimidation

The political strife between the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority and the Hamas Authority in Gaza comes at the expense of press freedom; as it results in imposing further self-censorship on their publications. On 4 January 2019, unknown assailants stormed the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority-run Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) and the official TV at the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood in the southern part of Gaza City, attacked the employees therein, and smashed its equipment and contents before they fled the scene. No one had claimed responsibility for the attack, but Palestinian officials held "Hamas" responsible.

* Censorship

Both the occupation authorities and the Palestinian Authority used pre-censorship to restrict freedom of opinion and expression in Palestine through the raid of printing houses and the confiscation of books before distribution. For example, on 10 July, the Israeli occupation forces stormed "Babylon" Press in the city of Halhul using its military vehicles and confiscated its equipment before fleeing the city at dawn.

Also, on 9 April, the intelligence service of the Ramallah-based Authority stormed the "Al-Hassan" print shop in Betonia, west of Ramallah, before arresting the shop's owner Muhammad Subhi Abu Tabikh- a detainee in Israeli prisons- and confiscating copies of the book "Dar al-Sadiqeen" (The path of the true believers) under the pretext of "not obtaining a license from the Ministry the culture".

* Assaults

Hamas-affiliated security forces resorted to violence to disperse a string of large-scale protests organized by hundreds of Palestinians in several areas of the Gaza Strip. The protests, which were staged to denounce the high cost of living, began on 14 March 2019 and lasted for three days. In response, Hamas security forces in Jabalia, northern Gaza, launched an arrest campaign and a series of security raids on the homes of dozens of citizens, including activists, journalists, and human rights workers.

On the other hand, the Israeli occupation forces violently dispersed, on August 11, a sit-in staged by thousands of Palestinian worshippers gathered at the Al-Aqsa Mosque to prevent Israeli settlers from storming the mosque. The occupation forces fired tear gas after the Palestinians performed the prayers of Eid al-Adha leaving many of them injured.

On May 3, the Israeli occupation forces fired live ammunition and rubber-coated metal at a number of protest marches, including an anti-settlement protest in Kafr Qaddum, south of Qalqiliya in the northern West Bank. A Palestinian journalist was also injured in a protest march in Beit Sira village, west of Ramallah.

The occupation authorities fired, on 15 May, live and rubber bullets and tear grenades at the "Great Return" Marches- organized by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to mark the 71st anniversary of the Nakba Day in 1948, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their cities and villages- which resulted in dozens of casualties.

On July 26, the Israeli occupation forces also used violence to disperse a sit-in staged on the sides of the apartheid wall in Wadi al-Hummus neighborhood in Sur Baher village in occupied Jerusalem. As a result, dozens of Palestinians suffocated due to the intense firing of tear gas canisters at the two sides.

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

The judicial arena has witnessed a number of critical cases that have a profound impact on Palestinian citizens and their right to exercise freedom of opinion and expression. Among these cases is the case of the deportation of Palestinian photojournalist Mustafa Iyad Al-Kharouf, as two Special Human Rights Rapporteurs at the United Nations called on the Israeli authorities to stop their attempts to deport Mustafa and regulate his residency status in Jerusalem. It is noteworthy that Mustafa was born in Algeria to a Palestinian father and an Algerian mother. He was living in occupied Jerusalem with his family when he was arrested by the occupation authorities in January 2019, for allegedly illegally staying in the country.

The second most important case is the case of barring the two US congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from their official visits to Palestine for their support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement against Israel and its settlement project in the Palestinian territories.

Fourth: Most common accusation against freedom of expression

The most common charges that were leveled against opinion activists in Palestine during 2019 are: "incitement on social media", "insulting high-ranking people", "Inciting sectarian strife", "insulting others in posts on social media", "undermining revolutionary unity", and "misusing technology".

Fifth: Victims

Following are the victims of the suppression of freedom of opinion and expression in Palestine: Omar Shakir, director of Human Rights Watch's office in Palestine, poet Widad al-Barghouthi, a lecturer at BirZeit University, media worker and writer Israa Lafi, in addition to hundreds of journalists and detainees in Israeli prisons such as; Osama Al-Kahlout, Ihab Fafous, Ahmed Sahmoud, Majed Qudaih, Jumaa Dalloul, Mustafa Al-Dahdouh, Ahmed Al-Shanbari, journalists Hazem Nasser, Musab Shower, and Amer Abu Arafa and others.

Tunisia

First: Introduction

The Tunisian Republic witnessed an exceptional year filled with major political incidents that have affected the state of freedom of expression for several years to come. In 2019, Tunisian citizens participated in two electoral processes; the parliamentary elections, and the presidential elections after the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi on 25 July 2019.

Contrary to many projections, Tunisia's Independent High Electoral announced, in evening of October 9, that moderate Islamist Ennahda Party won first place in the parliamentary elections that took place on October 6, followed by the Heart of Tunisia Party.

As for the presidential elections, the electoral commission announced, on October 17, that Kais Saied had officially won the presidency in Tunisia in the second round that took place on October 19, beating out his rival business tycoon Nabil Karoui.

Although there had been some violations of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in general during the election process, the year of 2019 will remain a stark reminder of a peaceful transition of power following a successful democratic process.

Regarding press freedom, a number of media outlets' owners had used their institutions to propagate their political campaigns or to gain support in favor of certain candidates, especially after many of these institutions were closed due to financial difficulties. The crisis had also reached the non-profit broadcasters, known as "community radios" in addition to a number of local radio and TV channels, resulting in a lack of pluralism in the media landscape. (1)

Second: Legislative and legal developments

The Tunisian People's Assembly (Parliament) didn't pass, during 2019, any laws that are directly related to press freedom, but it indeed discussed several laws that have a major impact on the state of public freedoms. (2)

On 18 January 2019, the Parliament's Rights and Freedoms Committee began discussing the notorious state of emergency bill submitted by President Béji Caid Essebsi on 30 November 2018 to replace a 1978 presidential decree that is used to impose a continuous state of emergency.

Consequently, the bill had been discussed amending some of its articles until it was adopted on the 3rd of May, but it hadn't been submitted to the parliament's plenary session during the year of 2019. (3)

On August 22 of the year, the Tunisian parliament also ratified, in an extraordinary session, the amendments to article 49 of the electoral law, which provides for reducing the constitutional time limits and shortening the appeals period to fall within a period not exceeding the term of the temporary president. (4)

On the other hand, it was announced in November 2019 that an independent and non-profit press council will be established that would provide a system for self-regulation and modification of the media sector to comply with the code of ethics, protect freedom of the press, and defend the right of citizens to obtain qualitative information. The "Press Council" was supposed to kick off in late November 2019.

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

One of the most cases that influenced freedom of expression in Tunisia in 2019 is the case of the attacks on journalists while covering candidates' political campaigns in the legislative and presidential elections took place in Tunisia during the year. For example, Dr. Moncef Marzouki attacked journalist Ahmed Qannouni during an interview he conducted with the Tunisian politician. Many media workers and institutions were also accused of being used as a tool for propagating some candidates' campaigns. Another case that garnered widespread attention and solidarity campaigns on social media is the case where Tunisian blogger Fadhila Belhaj is accused of "insulting an official on the Internet". The year also witnessed the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate not being invited to the session in which President Kais Saied was sworn in as Tunisia's new president.

Fourth: Violations of freedom of expression

Prevention from work

Many journalists in Tunisia were banned from doing their job and covering events by the executive authorities throughout the year, and in some cases, they faced legal cases for their media coverage. For instance, on the first of March, the Tunisian authorities prevented the Algerian community residing in Tunisia from organizing a demonstration in front of their embassy in al-Beheira region and in front of the municipal theater at Habib Bourguiba Avenue in central Tunis, to protest the candidacy of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth term. The demonstration was banned on the pretext of "not obtaining a prior license.

On March 14, the investigative judge of the Court of First Instance in the capital Tunis ordered the suspension of the "Four Facts" program aired at "Al-Hiwar al Tounsi" TV private channel, after it aired a report tackling the death of 15 infants in a government hospital in Tunis. The court also ruled to suspend another program aired on "Carthage Plus" TV for addressing the same tragic incident.

The ban came on the grounds that what will be broadcast "would harm the integrity of the conduct of the investigation, contradict its confidentiality and disrupt the conduct of justice."

In a related context, the Ministry of Education Undersecretary in Medenine (southeast of the country) barred journalist Afaf al-Wadrini, a correspondent for "Tunis Arrakmia" newspaper, from carrying out her work covering the protest movement organized by a number of teachers, before he threatened to sue her.

Censorship

After the January 14 uprising, journalists have become more susceptible to have their work censored by the Tunisian authorities or the management of the institution they work in. On the second of July 2019, a number of journalists at Tunisian News Agency (TAP) staged a sit-in at the agency's headquarters in protest against what they deemed interference in the editorial policy by the institution's head and director-general. They also accused the management of being biased in favor of certain entities and denounced the recent dismissal of four journalists after referring them to a disciplinary board.

Assaults

Verbal and physical violence was used by security forces, election campaign members and unidentified people against journalists to prevent them from covering incidents throughout 2019. For example, in the morning of April 25, the security forces broke into the headquarters of Nessma TV channel in Radas (9 km southeast of the capital), and seized its tools and equipment in implementation of the High Commission for Audiovisual Communications (HICA)'s decision; for allegedly airing the channel without obtaining a legal license and breaching the HICA's rules.

In another incident, the security forces assaulted, on June 15, journalist Naji al-Khalouli from Al-Kaf Radio office in Beja governorate, while he was covering the anger protests in Beja called by the state labor union. Journalists Afaf al-Wadrini and Naima Khalifeh were also subjected to verbal attacks by security personnel who attempted to prevent them covering a protest organized by a number of asylum-seekers from different African nationalities on the 20th of June 2019.

The attack didn't stop at journalists but it went beyond to reach presidential candidates, as the house of presidential candidate Leila Al Hamami was burned down by unknown people on the 26th of August.

On the other hand, protesters and postal workers gathering at the headquarters of the Ministry of Communication Technologies and Digital Economy were physically attacked by the security forces on August 21, the third day of their protest sit-in, which prompted a number of post offices in various regions of the Republic to declare a week-long strike.

Furthermore, a number of media workers and journalists were subjected to verbal and physical assault by some political candidates or members of their campaigns. For instance, on September 9, Tunisian Channel 9 reporter Hossam Hamad was verbally insulted and beaten by members of presidential candidate Abdul Karim Al-Zubaidi's campaign. Also, on September 12, Dr. Moncef Marzouki, candidate of Al Harak party "Tounes Al Irada", attacked journalist Ahmed Qanouni, while filming a media interview with him. The assault came after the interviewer asked Marzouki about the reason why he changed his stance towards Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, which led him to throw the microphone at the journalist and leave the studio right away. The two journalists Saida Traboulsi and Asilah Belghith were also subjected to verbal assault by some supporters of the elected president Kais Saied at Habib Bourguiba Street, on October 13, while covering the celebrations over his victory in the presidential elections.

Detention

The Tunisian authorities launched a series of arrest and detention campaigns against journalists throughout 2019. For example, the security forces arrested Moncef Kartas, a member of the UN's Panel of Experts at the Libya Sanctions Committee, upon his arrival to Tunis on March 26, for allegedly "willfully disclosing security information on counter-terrorism issues using illegal means". Consequently, on 21 May, the Court of Appeal in Tunis decided to temporarily release Kartas, a dual national of both Germany and Tunisia, allowing him to travel back to Germany. In another incident, the security forces arrested, on August 24, presidential candidate and founder of the local Nessma TV channel Nabil Karoui, in Béja (northwest of Tunisia), pursuant to an arrest warrant issued against him by the court of appeal on a charge of "money laundering", before he was later released on 9 October 2019.

Trials

The Tunisian authorities used prosecution, investigation and trial of journalists as a way to confront what they publish and curb their right to express their opinion, a matter which has raised fear over a serious setback for freedom of expression in the country. On February 16, the Misdemeanor Circuit at the Court of First Instance in Tunis sentenced Fadhila Belhaj to two years in prison on charges including "insulting an official on the Internet" over "Facebook" posts in which she criticizing the Ministry of Interior's handling of terrorism file. Also, on April 11, the Public Prosecutor of the Court of First Instance in Garmbalia referred Osama Al-Shawali, a journalist at the "Four Facts" Program, along with three employees at the city's elderly care center, to the misdemeanor circuit as a suspect. Al-Shawali was attacked by the center's employees on Monday April 8, after he filmed the violations and assaults endured by the elderly in the center. Another journalist, Yathrib al-Mishri, also appeared before the Court of First Instance in Tataouine on Thursday, April 18, over a legal case filed against her by the local union of the National Guard accusing her of "spreading false news" against the backdrop of an investigative report on the smuggling of falcons on the Tunisian-Libyan border. In the same context, media professional Hamza El-Beloumi and journalist Osama El-Shawali were referred again for investigation on October 8, on charges of "insulting the judiciary" after airing a report, on the "Four Fact" TV program, about a judge who was indicted in a bribery scandal.

Fifth: Most accusations against freedom of expression

The Tunisian authorities used a number of allegations to justify violations of freedom of expression, the most common of which are: Failure to obtain a prior permit, interference in the conduct of justice, violation of laws regulating the audiovisual sector, willful disclosure of security information on counter-terrorism issues using illegal means, money laundering, insulting an official on the Internet, libel and defamation, dissemination of false news, and defaming the judiciary.

Sixth: Victims

The list of victims of freedom of expression in Tunisia this year included: Blogger Fadhila Belhaj and journalists Afaf al-Wadrani, Naji al-Khalouli, Naima Khulaisa, Hossam Hamad, journalist Ahmed Qanouni, Hamza al-Baloumi, Osama al-Shawali, Yathrib al-Mashiri, Saida Traboulsi and Asilah Belghith, international expert Moncef Kartas, and Nessma TV channel founder Nabil Karoui.

The list also included: presidential candidate Leila Al Hamami, the headquarters of Nessma TV channel in Radas, the "Four Facts" TV program, Algerian community residing in Tunisia, in addition to the postal workers who staged a protest at the headquarters of the Ministry of Communication Technologies and Digital Economy.

Footnotes:

1. A news report entitled "Naji Al-Baghouri: The media sector strike is still underway" - Published on Mosaique FM website on March 12, 2019- last accessed date: November 9, 2019- <https://www.mosaiquefm.net/ar/-تونس-أخبار-وطنية/510656/ناجي-البغوري-إضراب-قطاع-الإعلام-مايزال-قائما>
2. Draft laws- The Tunisian People's Assembly website- last accessed date: November 9, 2019- http://arp.tn/site/projet/AR/index.jsp?c_t=41&prof=3
3. Report of the Committee on Rights, Freedoms and External Relations on the basic Law relating to the State of Emergency - Last accessed date: 9 November 2019- http://arp.tn/site/servlet/Fichier?code_obj=107073&code_exp=1&langue=1
4. A news report entitled "The Tunisian Parliament Approves the Amendment of the Electoral Law"- Published on: August 22, 2019- last accessed date: November 9, 2019- <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1277855--البرلمان-التونسي-بصادق-تعديل-القانون-الانتخابي>

Bahrain

First: Introduction

After a long series of police prosecution and trials that don't meet the most basic rules of justice, the Bahraini authorities- with support from Saudi Arabia- got rid of many political opponents, human rights defenders and social media activists either through imprisonment or banishing from the country. Having said that, the repressive authorities in Bahrain did not stop their violations of the right to expression, but rather they have intensified their repression this year to reach Bahraini activists living abroad and every single person who communicates with them or follow their social media accounts from inside the country.

This new crackdown started with a speech delivered by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa on 20 May 2019 stressing that he had directed" the competent security services to put a strict end to the misuse of social media ,"which was followed by many political and executive commands, and ended with messages disseminated by the so-called" Anti-Cyber Crime Department "to those who follow the activists' accounts or websites threatening them with prosecution .

Second: Legislative and legal developments

The Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security Committee in the Bahraini Parliament agreed on a bill adding a new article (9 bis) to Law 60/2014 on cybercrimes. The article stipulates that" :Imprisonment and a fine of 1,000BD (approximately \$ 2,650) at minimum and 50,000BD at maximum (approximately \$ 13,200), or one of these penalties, shall be imposed on anyone who commits or incites damaging the reputation of people through the misuse of social media outlets, or defaming others and causing damage to them through the use of social media outlets(1) ."

In its session convened on 27 October 2019, the Bahraini Cabinet also began to discuss a draft law regulating the press and media, to be referred to the parliament after being endorsed(2) .

On 21 May of the year, the King of Bahrain ratified Law No. 8 of 2019 amending Article 11 of Law 58 of 2006 regarding the protection of the community against terrorist acts. Under the amendment, a prison sentence not exceeding five years and a fine of no less than BD2,000 (\$ 5,300) will be the penalty for each one who promotes, extols, glorifies, justifies, admires or encourages acts of terrorism punishable by law inside the Kingdom or abroad(3) .

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

The most important cases that influenced public opinion during 2019 are the cases of: human rights activist Sayed Yusuf al-Muhafada (residing in Germany) and activist Hassan Abdul Nabi Al-Sestri (residing in Australia), after the Bahraini Ministry of the Interior

accused them of" running electronic accounts that aim at discrediting Bahrain's reputation ,"along with the London-based journalist Adel Marzouq who is accused of "instigating the spirit of strife among the components of the Bahraini society ."Another incident that attracted nationwide interest is the attack on Bahraini expatriate photojournalist Mosa Abd Ali by some members of the Bahraini Embassy in London after he climbed the embassy's building wall .

Fourth: Violations of freedom of expression

Prevention from work/Ban

On 25 June 2019 ,the Bahraini authorities prevented Anadolu Agency correspondent Asaad Furat from entering the country to cover the" Peace to Prosperity "workshop, known as the" Manama Conference ,"which discusses the economic aspects of the US political settlement plan in the Middle East known as the" Deal of the Century ."The ban came on the pretext that Asaad didn't obtain the required press credentials to cover the event, at time the authorities allowed seven Israeli journalists to enter its territories for the same purpose .

The authorities also refused to grant accreditation to all Russian media outlets suggesting that they follow the conference through YouTube.

Assaults

The year 2019 recorded manifold cases of assault against prisoners of conscience in Jaw Prison and protesters in marches staged in the predominantly Shiite neighborhoods. The most notable examples are: the attack on Bahraini expatriate photojournalist Mosa Mohamed, aka" Mosa Abd Ali ,"by some members of the Bahraini Embassy in London after he climbed the embassy's building wall on 26 July in protest against the execution of the death sentence issued against citizens Ali Al Arab and Ahmed Al Mulla.

Also, on June 10, the Bahraini authorities demolished the" Al-Wasat "newspaper building, two years after the retaliatory decision to halt its publication and lay off 180 of its employees, on 4 June 2017 .

Detention

-The Bahraini authorities used summons, interrogation, investigation and detention orders on a very large scale during 2019. For instance, on 14 January, they arrested Hadeer Abdullah Hassan Abadi, 25, sister of detainee Ahmad Abadi, from the town of Karzakan, after being summoned for investigation by phone. Since then, Hadeer had been held in pretrial detention pending probe on a charge of" joining a terrorist group " as the Prosecution refused to order her release under the guarantee of her place of residence. However, on 27 August, the court acquitted Hadeer of all the charges attributed to her, after spending 6 months in remand detention .

The Public Prosecution ordered, on 14 April, the detention of Ibrahim El-Sheikh, a writer at" Akhbar Al Khaleej "newspaper, over charges of" broadcasting false rumors in wartime "after publishing, via his social media accounts, an article titled" Media

Misinformation and our military scourges "in which he criticized the media for the way it covers the Saudi-led war in Yemen. El-Sheikh was released on 18 April.

Former MP Osama Jaber Muhana Al-Tamimi, who always speaks out against the Sunni ruling elite's repression of the majority Shi'a population, was also arrested on 6 August from his house by members of the Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) over charges involving "forgery "after receiving a series of security threats.

In another instance, the Bahraini Public Prosecution ordered on 17 April the detention of former MP Mohamed Khaled on a charge of " publishing false news and information that would harm public order ;"in connection to some tweets he posted on the social networking website" Twitter , "before releasing him the next day (18 April). Lawyer Abdallah Hashim was also summoned for interrogation by the Public Prosecution on the 15th of May. He was then ordered to be detained for a week pending investigation and his phone was confiscated after being charged with" publishing fake news that can harm public order "in connection to some comments he shared on his Twitter account .

On 4 August, the Public Prosecution referred political activist Ali Jassim to trial after holding him in custody on a charge of" insulting the divine entity ."Shiite cleric Muhammad al-Rayash was also detained for a week pending probe after accusing him of" insulting Yazid Ibn Muawiya ."

Trials

Just as the Bahraini authorities use pretrial detention on a massive scale, they also use trials as a tool to suppress dissidents and opinion-holders. For example, on March 13, a Bahraini court sentenced Ibrahim Sharif, member of the Central Committee of Bahraini opposition group" National Democratic Action Society "known as" Wa'ad , "to six months in prison along with fine of 500 dinars (over \$1,325 USD) to halt the implementation of the sentence. Sharif was charged with" insulting a foreign head of state "over tweets supporting the uprising in Sudan .

The prosecution's case against Ebrahim Sharif was based on a tweet he posted on 25 December 2018, with a photograph of Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir and the text : "Get out of here, man ... 30 years ago, Omar al-Bashir came on the back of a tank claiming' salvation .'During his reign, civil wars have piled up, the South seceded, and he has impoverished, starved and degraded the kind and noble Sudanese people. The time has come for freedom for the Sudanese and the departure of the dictatorial president.

On 17 September 2019, the Court of Appeal rejected the request filed by prominent human right defender Nabeel Rajab's legal team to replace his jail terms by non-custodial sentences or alternative sanctions upon the " alternative punishment law ." Rajab is currently serving a five-year prison sentence on a charge of" offending a foreign country "for posting tweets criticizing the war waged by Saudi Arabia and its pro-government alliance against Yemen. The human rights defender is also serving a two-year prison sentence against the backdrop of media interviews in which he criticized the Bahraini government .

Intimidation

Not only are opinion holders, journalists, human rights defenders and political activists subjected to threats and intimidation by the Bahraini government, but also social media users are not spared from the risk. On 30 May, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior threatened citizens to take legal actions against anyone who follows the "accounts that are offensive to Bahrain's social security" calling on them to unfollow such accounts .

The Ministry of the Interior accused in a statement the Germany-based human rights activist Sayed Yusuf al-Muhafada and the Australia-based activist Hassan Abdul Nabi Al-of" running electronic accounts that aim at harming Bahrain's reputation ."It also accused on 21 May the London-based journalist Adel Marzouq of" instigating the spirit of strife among the Bahraini society's components "threatening him along with anyone who promotes his posts or messages with legal prosecution .

Fifth: Most common accusations against freedom of expression

The most common charges issued by the Bahraini government to restrict freedom of expression are" :joining a terrorist group" ,"spreading false rumors in wartime ," "publishing false news and information that would harm public order" ,"insulting the divine entity" ,"insulting Yazid Ibn Muawiya ,"and" instigating the spirit of strife among the Bahraini society's factions ."

Sixth: Victims

The list of victims in Bahrain involves the following: Sayed Yusuf al-Muhafada, activist Hassan Abdul Nabi Al-Sestri, human rights defender Nabeel Rajab, journalist Adel Marzouq, photojournalist Mosa Abd Ali, Anadolu Agency correspondent Asaad Furat, writer Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, former MP Osama Jaber Muhana Al-Tamimi, former MP Mohamed Khaled, lawyer Abdallah Hashim, political activist Ali Jassim, Shiite cleric Muhammad al-Rayash, political activist Ibrahim Sherif and Hadeer Abdallah Hassan Abadi.

Footnotes

1. A news report entitled" Parliamentary Committee Agrees on Imprisonment, 20,000 BD Fine as Punishment for Slander -" Published on" Bahrain Mirror " website on 9 November 2019- Last accessed date: 10 November 2019
<http://bahrainmirror.com/news/56440.html>
2. A news report entitled" Bahrain Press Association : "The new Press Law is a crime against Bahrain and journalists -""Published on" Manama Post "website on 9 November 2019- Last accessed date: 10 November 2019
<https://www.manamapost.com/news/2019131184/> Bahrain-Journalism-Health-Law-Association
3. Law No. (8) of 2019- Published on" Legislation and Legal Opinion "website on 23 May 2019 - Last accessed date: 9 November 2019

<http://www.legalaffairs.gov.bh/196887.aspx?cms=q8FmFJgiscJUAh5wTFxPQnjc67hw%2Bcd53dCDU8XkwhyDqZn9xoYKj2QA8aA6TMDowGbQcbszWqF3-0U Y %%3>

Saudi Arabia

First: Introduction

Everything can be negotiable in Saudi Arabia except to undermine the royal family's power. They can repudiate extremism, discrimination, and human rights violations took place in the past and imputed all such transgressions to the Muslim Brotherhood group. They can allow women to get behind the wheels of their cars; they can even allow them to walk in the street with tight clothes and appear in public without hijab (veil), they can also allow women to be appointed to government positions. They can launch an entertainment sector, open cinemas and nightclubs, organize sing and dance- parties and invite singers from all over the world. They can do all these things to improve the Kingdom's image in the West and to alleviate the pressure placed by calls for fundamental political reform which rests on the core values of human rights. But, in spite of such cosmetic reforms in public freedoms record, the violations of human rights and most specifically those against freedom of opinion and expression remain the same and have worsened indeed .

In other words, whoever criticizes or rejects the government's measures or proposes a genuine reform vision in the Kingdom is subjected to either murder or long term imprisonment following a trial that lacks due process, or to enforced disappearance for long periods without being brought to trial, at the same time the authorities harness media outlets and platforms to pray for the King and the Crown Prince .

Second: Legislative and legal developments

The Public Decency Code, approved by the Council of Ministers upon Resolution No. 444 issued on 9 April 2019, has entered into force as of Saturday 28 September, after the Minister of Interior issued the regulations for its implementation. The Resolution, which consists of 10 articles, lists the public behavior violations which include: appearing in a public place in " indecent " clothing or wearing clothing with language, images or symbols that may offend public decency .

Other violations may include: writing or drawing on public transportation vehicles or public walls, or any of public place's components or assets, or any other means of transportation, unless authorized by the concerned authority, in addition to committing any acts that may harm, intimidate or endanger the public places' visitors or passerbys .

On 28 May, Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers issued a new regulation on the "use of information and communication technology in government agencies " upon Resolution No. 555 issued on 27 May 2019 .

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

The most prominent cases that had a major impact on freedom of expression in KSA are: the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside his country's consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018, the trial of Loujain al-Hathloul and a number of human rights defenders, and the trial of cleric Salman al-Awdah along with other opponents of the Kingdom's decisions pertaining to the boycott of Qatar.

Fourth: Violations of freedom of expression

Prevention from work/Ban

You can barely find any TV program or newspaper that deviates from its prescribed role, which is to pay tribute to the achievements made by the crown prince, and in case any media outlet that does so or crosses its red line, the authorities rush to suspend it without an explanation or further ado. An example of this would be: the sudden suspension of "Maa Daoud) "with Daoud) TV show, aired on SBC channel and presented by Saudi media professional Daoud Al Sheryan, President of the Radio and Television Authority. The ban came after the TV host discussed, throughout 6 episodes of his controversial program, a number of social issues including; teenage girls running away from home, foreign women who marry Saudis (and vice versa) and the issue of slums in the country.

Blocking websites/services

In addition to the Saudi authorities taking control of media outlets, they seek to further suppress freedom of expression by restricting social media through mobile applications.

The government's position appears blurred and hesitant regarding the applications using the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) call services. For example, it blocked the VoIP services in WhatsApp for the second time after it suddenly worked in the morning of March 12 and lasted for a couple of hours before it stopped against.

It's worth mentioning that free (VoIP) call services were blocked in applications such as WhatsApp, Viber and others in 2016 without clear reasons. However, on 13 September 2017, the Saudi Minister of Communications and Information Technology Abdullah bin Amer al-Sawahha announced lifting the ban on all VoIP apps. He stressed at the time that the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) would oversee reviewing that all VoIP apps comply with the regulatory requirements and that it would work with telecommunications companies to enable lifting the ban in accordance with regulations .

On the other hand, the Saudi Ministry of Information began on July 29 to block websites, electronic forums and social media accounts bearing the names of tribes, cities or public places, in implementation of Article 16 (Paragraph III) of the electronic publishing law .

Detention

Prolonged detention and imprisonment without trial, exacerbated by the extremely poor prison conditions, is one of the Saudi authorities' means to suppress dissent, silence voices, and restrict freedom of expression. Besides prisoners of conscience who have been detained in Saudi prisons since 2017, security forces have added other prisoners including Saudi citizens and Arab expatriates residing in Saudi Arabia.

For example, on 22 February 2019, the Saudi State Security Service arrested Jordanian journalist Abd al-Rahman Farhana at a checkpoint near Dammam airport, while he was on his way to Jeddah. He was then taken to his home which was searched by police officers before confiscating the journalist's mobile phone and personal computer, and thereafter the security personnel took him to an unknown destination without announcing the reason for his arrest .

On 4 April 2019, the State Security Service arrested, without giving any reasons, Palestinian doctor Muhammad Salih al-Khudari (Abu Hani), who is in charge of managing relations between Hamas and the Kingdom for two decades and has been in Jeddah for nearly three decades.

In the same context, the Saudi security services launched a large-scale arrest campaign that began on the 4th of April 2019 in the capital Riyadh and the city of Dammam, Eastern Region. The campaign, which targeted women's rights advocates, included two individuals who hold dual US-Saudi citizenship, in addition to the following: writer Fahd Abu al-Khail, Tamar al-Marzouqi, writer Khadija al-Harbi, Ali al-Saffar, Muhammad al-Sadiq, Abdullah al-Duhailan, Muqbal al-Saqqar, Yazid Al-Fifi, Anas al-Mazrou, academic Badr al-Ibrahimi, doctor Sheikha al-Arf and her husband lawyer Abdullah al-Shehri, and activists Ayman Al-Drees, Salah al-Haidar, Nayef Al-Mohandis and Rida al-Bouri .

With regard to the General Authority for Entertainment headed by Turki al-Sheikh, the Saudi authorities arrested, on September 10, Omar al-Mukbel, a professor at the Faculty of Sharia (Islamic Law) at the University of Qassim; for criticizing the practices of the Entertainment Sector in the Kingdom.

Also, on October 21, the authorities arrested poet Hamoud bin Qasi al-Subaie along with video designer Consul bin Subaie, against the backdrop of a video criticizing Turki al-Sheikh and the Entertainment Sector's policy .

Trials

The 13th of March 2019 marked the first trial session of nine Saudi women's rights defenders before the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, in which journalists and diplomats were prevented from attending the hearing .

Activists Loujain al-Hathloul, academic Aziza Yousef, blogger Eman al-Nafjan, Hatoon al-Fassi, Shahdan Al-Anzi, Miya Al-Zahrani, Abeer Namankani, and Nouf Abdel-Aziz appeared before the court, over charges related to their work with

the United Nations and others include contact with international human rights defenders. All the aforementioned activists were not allowed to communicate with a lawyer or even to defend themselves. Days later, on 28 March, only Aziza Yousef and Eman al-Nafjan were temporarily released.

On the trial's day, 13 March, Loujain al-Hathloul's family reported that the authorities offered to release her in return for her silence over alleged torture she suffered in custody, as they asked her to appear on a video to deny the torture she was subjected to, but she rejected the offer .

It is worth noting that the above mentioned women human rights defenders were arrested as of May 2018 .

The trial of cleric Salman al-Awdah also continued this year and his case was adjourned for several times, until it was set for adjudication at the hearing of 10 October, but the court decided to extend the sentencing hearing to 30 October 2019. Al-Awdah's trial first began in September 2018, a year after his arrest. The Public Prosecution called for issuing a death sentence against him as a discretionary penalty, over several charges including " :Corrupting the land by repeatedly endeavoring to shake the structure of the nation and bring about civil strife; inflaming society against the rulers and stirring up unrest; and connection to characters and organizations and holding meetings and conferences inside and outside the kingdom to enact the agenda of a terrorist organization against the nation and its rulers ; (1) "against the backdrop of some comments he posted on" Twitter "in September 2017 about the diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The arrest of al-Awdah came as part of a crackdown launched by the Saudi authorities targeting 20 citizens including writers and journalists critical of the Kingdom's boycott of Qatar.

The case of Jamal Khashoggi's assassination inside his country's consulate in Istanbul on the 2nd of October 2018 still tends to overshadow the current scene in the Kingdom. The authorities began to hold a sham trial to avoid accusations that the state of Saudi Arabia is responsible for this terrible crime. In a trial that was shrouded in secrecy and whose first session began on Thursday, 3 January 2019, the criminal court in Riyadh convicted 11 defendants of complicity to the murder of Mr .Khashoggi, but their identities were not revealed by Saudi officials. The Public Prosecution sought death sentence for five of the 11 unidentified defendants for their direct involvement in the murder.

On 19 June, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary killings announced in a report that" Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was the victim of a premeditated extrajudicial execution, for which the State of Saudi Arabia is responsible(2)."

Fifth: Most common accusations against freedom of expression

The following are the most common accusations used in Saudi Arabia by the authorities to restrict freedom of expression" :suspicious contact with foreign parties" ,"calling for regime change in the Kingdom" ,"promoting footage supporting the uprisings in the Arab countries" ,"producing something that harms public order, religious values, and public morals ."

Sixth: Victims

Following is the list of victims of freedom of expression in the Kingdom, which includes those who were arrested during 2019 along with prisoners of conscience whose trials were underway during the year :Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Amal El-Harbi, Hatoon al-Fassi, Miya Al-Zahrani, and Abeer Namankani ,Nouf Abdel-Aziz, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sada, Shahdan al-Anzi, Salman al-Awdah, Omar al-Mukbel ,Fahd Abu Al-Khail ,Thamar Al-Marzouqi, Khadija Al-Harbi, Ali al-Saffar, Muhammad al-Sadiq, Abdullah al-Duhailan, Muqbal al-Saqqar, Yazid Al-Fifi, Anas al-Mazrou, Badr Al-Ibrahimi, Sheikha al-Arf, Abdullah Al-Shehri, and activists Ayman Al-Drees, Salah Al-Haidar, NayefAl-Mohandis and Rida Al-Bouri.

The list also involves: Jordanian journalist Abd al-Rahman Farhana and Palestinian doctor Muhammad Salih al-Khudari .

Footnotes

1. A news report entitled" Corrupting the land and calling for regime change...37 charges against Salman al -Awdah in Saudi Arabia -"Published on 4 September 2019- Last accessed date: 22 October 2019 - <https://cms.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=04092018&id=96a7e46f-ae04-47c9-a48a-eb393ccb8635>
2. A report on the UN Special Rapporteur website- Published on 19 June 2019 - Last accessed date: 22 October 2019 - <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24713&LangID=A>

Sudan

Introduction

After a long battle, peaceful protests have finally succeeded in toppling Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and forming a Sovereign Council to shift the nation into a civilian-ruled system, after Army Chief Awad Ibn Auf announced, on 11 April, that al-Bashir had been toppled and detained in a safe place. Then, on 20 August, the Transitional Military Council (TMC) issued a decree which led to the formation of a sovereign council that would run the country for the transitional period, amid public optimism regarding the future of the country. However, Omar al-Bashir's downfall was not the ultimate end of an era of crimes against citizens; as violations of the right to freedom of opinion and expression persist after the overthrow of al-Bashir until the signing of the Constitutional Declaration on August 17 .

Demonstrations and protest activities first erupted in a number of Sudanese cities on 19 December 2018 demanding an end to the harsh living conditions, before they escalated into demands for al-Bashir to step down and to overthrow his regime. Al-Bashir faced these protests by arresting dozens of opposition leaders, journalists and protesters, in addition to imposing censorship on newspapers. He also declared, on 22 February, a one-year state of emergency across the country, dissolved the federal government and state governments, and appointed high-ranking police and military officers to rule these states. In response, thousands of Sudanese announced their rejection to al-Bashir's decisions and, consequently they staged, on April 6, a sit-in outside the army command headquarters in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum. The sit-in continued even after al-Bashir's downfall on April 11, until the military armed forces of the Sudanese Transitional Military Council started on the 3rd of June to violently disperse the sit-in leaving 87 killed and 168 wounded .

First: Legislative and legal developments

The legislative development in Sudan during 2019 is divided into two stages. The first stage, which ended in August 2019, was marked by extensive curbing of freedom of speech; as the National Assembly of Sudan (parliament) approved, on 11 March, a six-month state of emergency .

On February 22, President Bashir already declared a state of emergency in all Sudan's states upon Republican Decree No. 6 of 2019 .

On the other hand, the second stage of legislative development, which began after August 2019, witnessed a considerable optimism and desire for change with the adoption of legislation supporting freedom of opinion and expression, following the formation of the Sovereign Council and the civil government. In his first statement after assuming his position as Minister of Culture and Information in the new Sudanese government, Faisal Muhammad Saleh announced on 6 September 2019 that he would work on rescinding and amending all laws restricting freedom of the press in the country .

Second: Violations of freedom of expression

***Prevention from work/Ban**

The Sudanese authorities tended to suppress freedom of expression through work suspensions and imposing ban on several activities or events. For example, on 31 May 2019, security services closed the Khartoum office of Al-Jazeera network, withdrew its license, and confiscated all its equipment and belongings, without giving any reasons. Al Jazeera's Khartoum bureau remained shut down until it was reopened on August 16 upon a decision by the Transitional Military Council.

Hiba Makawi was suspended from her position as a national radio reporter on 2 May after she demanded on her Facebook page to end al-Bashir's government's strict control of media platforms in the country .

The regime also used its authority to violate the right to peaceful assembly, when it banned on 2 March a symposium in memory of the victims of the tragic events, internally displaced persons and those held in arbitrary imprisonment. The symposium was supposed to be held at " Dar al-Omma "with the participation of political and civil powers that took part in the Sudanese uprisings .

The Sudanese authorities also banned on 6 March a press conference of the leader of the opposition Sudanese" Congress Party , "Omar al-Dugair, following his release from prison against the backdrop of peaceful protests denouncing al-Bashir extending his tenure in office .

***Detention**

Sudanese security services sought to make journalists absent from the scene of major events using many tools including incarceration and detention. For example, on 2 June, they arrested French journalist Gennial Lounoir in Atbara city, the birthplace of the Sudanese revolution, while she was covering incidents there. Also, on 22 February 2019, the security and intelligence services arrested Osman Mirghani, editor-in-chief of El Tayyar daily newspaper, after commenting on the Sudanese then-President's decisions in a televised interview .

The security services also arrested on 24 July the Chairman of the General Sudanese Journalists Union, Al-Sadiq Al-Ruzaiqi, as part of a crackdown targeting figures from the Islamic Movement and the National Congress Party. Al-Ruzaiqi had been held in detention until he was released on 29 July .

Journalist Dora Qambo was also arrested, on 10 February, from her car at a traffic checkpoint near Omdurman Women's Prison, after she went there to cover protests.

Being subjected to detention isn't confined to journalists; as the authorities went further to arrest political leaders and human rights defenders as well. On 5 June, the security forces arrested Yasir Arman, deputy head of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), after his meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, during his visit to Khartoum in an attempt to mediate between the conflict parties in Sudan.

The security forces also arrested protest leaders Mohamed Esmat and Ismail Jalab on the 7th and 8th of June shortly after meeting Abiy Ahmed .

Furthermore, on 5 March 2019, the security forces arrested human rights defender Manal Al Awal from her home for her activity in various social movements. She was released later, on 9 March, along with a number of women detainees, upon an order by former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on the occasion of International Women's Day.

*Trials

The Sudanese authorities used the judiciary to suppress journalists and demonstrators. For example, on 9 March, the emergency court in Khartoum sentenced 9 women to one month in prison each and 20 lashes for their participation in anti-government protests that took place in the Sudanese capital on the 7th of March. The judge, however, suspended the execution of the flogging sentence, apparently giving in to pressure and objection from the women's lawyers until the appeals court makes a final decision. Then on 12 March, the appeals court ordered their immediate release saying that they had spent enough time in prison.

On March 10, the emergency court also sentenced Maryam Sadiq Al-Mahdi, deputy head of the National Umma Party and the daughter of opposition leader and former Sudanese Prime Minister Sadiq Al-Mahdi, to one week in detention for participating in anti-government demonstrations .

In the same regard ,the Press and Publications Court ordered, on September 5, the arrest of journalist Suheir Abdelrahim, for not attending two of her trial hearings; based on a complaint filed against her by the ruling Transitional Military Council accusing her of insulting the council, in reference to an article she wrote in El" Intibaha "newspaper entitled" What to write"?

*Blocking websites/services

The Sudanese authorities cut off landline internet connections in the country at 12 pm on June 10, a week after mobile online services were cut and a day following the civil disobedience called for by protest leaders .

The spokesman for the ruling Transitional Military Council, Shams al-Din Kabbashi, said on June 11 that the Internet connection will not be back at the present time, asserting that the Internet is" a threat to national security ."

*Intimidation

The Sudanese regime used intimidation and threats to muzzle the mouths of not only Sudanese citizens but also foreign officials. On 12 June, Sudan's Foreign Ministry summoned the British ambassador in Khartoum Irfan Siddiq, as an objection to his remarks posted on" Twitter "after the Sudanese security forces dispersed the sit-in staged in front of the General Command of the Sudanese army; as he tweeted" :No excuse for any such attack. This Must Stop Now ."In response, the spokesman of Sudan's

foreign ministry said that the repeated tweets of the ambassador contradict“ the established diplomatic norms .”

*Assaults

Former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and the ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) used to extensively kill and physically attack peaceful protesters all over Sudan throughout 2019. According to estimates by the Sudanese Doctors Central Committee, more than 246 protesters were killed and about 1,353 injured across the country since protests erupted on December 19, 2018. The dispersal of the sit-in outside Khartoum's army headquarters in 2019 occupied the largest share of the number of victims with an estimated death toll of 127 people, including at least 19 children, according to a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Sudan Doctors Central Committee. At least five protesters, including three students, were also shot dead on July 29, when security forces broke out a rally organized by high school students to protest against a shortage of bread and fuel in the city of Al-Obeid ,the capital of North Kordofan State (about 400 km southwest of Khartoum.)

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

Sudanese courts witnessed a number of cases of public concern during 2019. The trial of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, on charges of corruption, receiving illegal gifts and possessing foreign currency, is at the forefront of these cases, and its first trial session took place on 19 August 2019. The year also witnessed another prominent trial as the emergency court in Khartoum sentenced nine women to 20 lashes each for their participation in anti-government protests that broke out in the Sudanese capital on the 7th of March. The judge, however, suspended the execution of the flogging sentence, apparently giving in to pressure and objection from the women's lawyers until the appeals court makes a final decision. Then on 12 March, the appeals court ordered their immediate release saying that they had spent enough time in prison .

It's worth mentioning that the Sudanese authorities have set up special emergency courts to bring to trial all protesters who are accused of violating the state of emergency imposed by Omar al-Bashir .

The trial of protesters by these emergency courts, which were established in implementation of Omar al-Bashir's decision, also played an effective role in fueling the anger of opponents and demonstrators all over the country. For instance, on March 24, a Sudanese emergency court sentenced six protesters to six months in prison for violating the state of emergency imposed in the country.

Fourth: Most common accusations against freedom of expression

Throughout 2019, Sudanese citizens faced a number of charges that aimed at curbing freedom of opinion and expression. Among these charges" :mass rioting, public inconvenience, and disturbing public safety and security" ,"breaching the state of emergency imposed in the country ,"and" insulting the Military Council ."

Fifth: Victims

The list of victims of violations of freedom of opinion and expression in Sudan involves a wide range of people, including women, men, children and elderly people, whether they are Sudanese citizens or foreigners, listed as follows: human rights defender Manal Al-Awal, French journalist Gennial Lounoir, Osman Mirghani, editor-in-chief of El Tayyar daily newspaper, national radio reporter Hiba Makawi, journalists Suheir Abdelrahim and Dora Qambo.

The list also includes :Yasir Arman deputy head of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM),(protest leaders Mohamed Esmat and Ismail Jalab, young man Saad Muhammad Ahmed, who died from his wounds after the government dispersed a sit-in in the city of Nyala, South Darfur using live bullets, tear gas and rubber bombs, and Ahmed Bakri Khairallah, who died on May 17 from three gunshot wounds during the April 7 march, in addition to Maryam Sadiq Al-Mahdi, deputy head of the National Umma Party .

Iraq

First: Introduction

To address Iraq's human rights record, we have, from the outset, to be aware of the critical regional and international political balances that govern the political construction of the regime. Since the formation of the first transitional government in 2004, the regime has turned into a quota-based political system, or what is known as "Muhasasa ;" as the Shias assumed the presidency of the cabinet, while the president (head of state) was Sunni and the Kurds presided over the Parliament. Then, after the 2005 elections, which were boycotted by the Sunnis, a Kurdish leader assumed office as the President of Iraq and the Shia leaders took over the cabinet, while the Sunnis took over the Parliament. The quota-based muhasasa system has become a prevailing political norm up to the present, although there is no article in the Iraqi constitution that provides for this. This government system has triggered sectarian differences and partisan interests which have become the basis for the assignment of government jobs. As a result, unemployment has proliferated in Iraq that a citizen couldn't find a job opportunity to provide his basic needs, in spite of the country's rich abundance of oil and natural resources. The ethno-sectarian" muhasasa "political system has also promoted corruption and reinforced patronage networks which run armed groups. These groups defend corruption and use armed attacks, arrests and intimidation as a tool to prevent journalists and free media outlets from tackling corruption issues. Consequently, the name of Iraq has been associated with corruption after it ranked the 12th most corrupt country in the world in 2018 (1) .

Second: Legislative and legal developments

On January 12, the Iraqi parliament discussed the draft" Information Technology Crimes Law ,"known as the cybercrime law, proposed by the government. It had completed its first reading of the draft law on the same day, but the second reading was postponed over objections escalated by human rights groups, which prompted the parliament to assign the concerned committees to review it and make the necessary amendments. However, the Human Rights Committee in the parliament submitted a request to withdraw the discussion of the draft law from the session's agenda and the request was accepted. The bill contains four chapters: the first chapter includes definitions and goals, the second one covers punitive provisions, and the third one involves procedures for collecting evidence, investigation and trial, while the fourth chapter includes general and final provisions(2) .

The cybercrime law poses a serious threat to freedom of expression in Iraq since it abounds with vaguely-worded and loose terminology that imposes harsh prison and life sentences as well as hefty fines against Internet activists over vague crimes, such as "undermining the country's independence, unity or safety or its economic, political, military, or supreme security interests ,"and" disturbing public security or damaging the country's reputation, as well as" harming the national economy and the country's financial confidence."

It is worth noting that this bill was first presented to the parliament for discussion in 2011, before it was withdrawn on 6 February 2013 over pressure from civil society organizations.

On 24 June, the Parliament also completed the first reading of a draft law on freedom of expression and opinion and peaceful protests, which was previously introduced by the government in prior sessions. This law was widely criticized by human rights groups because it introduces severe restrictions of the right to freedom of expression and assembly; as Article (7) thereof states that protest organizers would be required to get permission from the head of the Province Administrative Unit to hold public assemblies at least five days in advance. It also gives the head of the Administrative Unit the right to reject any requests to hold public assemblies, while placing on the committee organizing the assembly the burden of appealing against the decision before the court. Furthermore, Article (8) prohibits peaceful assemblies from taking place "in public streets "or to be extended after 10 pm, which constitutes an encroachment on the right to peaceful assembly, not to mention the flexible and loose expressions the law entails; such as" public order "and" public morals ,"which can be used in malicious cases against citizens⁽³⁾ .

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

There are a number of cases that attracted a nationwide interest in Iraq during 2019 including :the Iraqi authorities and armed groups using violence against protesters objecting to the widespread corruption, unemployment and poor public services, and the Nilesat satellite blocking" Al-Ibaa "News TV after it broadcasted pictures of Iraqi resistance operations against the US occupation in 2003. But the ban was eventually lifted following a large-scale solidarity campaign launched by media institutions and social media activists .

Also, the cold-blooded assassination of the Kurdish NRT television channel's presenter Amanj Babani and his wife and their young son had attracted the public's attention in the country during this period .

Fourth: Violations against freedom of expression

***Prevention from work/ Ban**

Barring journalists from news coverage is a common violation committed by Iraqi authorities during 2019. For example, on September 2, riot police in Maysan (400 km southeast of Baghdad) prevented a group of satellite channels' crews from covering the dispersal of a protest sit-in staged by a group of engineers in front of the Maysan Oil Company. Moreover" ,Tigris" "Degla) TV reporter Hassan Issa was physically assaulted by a police officer and his camera was confiscated after deleting its content.

Also on the same day (September 2), Iraq's media regulator, the Communication and Media Commission (CMC), closed the US-funded Al-Hurra TV's regional offices for a period of 3 months, accusing the network of slander and bias for airing an investigative

report exposing corruption within the country's religious institutions. The committee also called on " Al-Hurra "to broadcast an official apology for releasing this report .

*Detention

Journalists and social media activists in Iraq are not only subjected to detention or incarceration by security forces or upon court orders, but rather they can be arrested or detained by some government officials. For example, on 22 January, a police force arrested " Al-Mawsaliah "TV reporter Ziyad Tariq Bashir and photojournalist Ahmad Amjad Hamed and took them to the headquarters of the Fifth Regiment, where the authorities tried to force them to sign a pledge declaring that they would no longer carry out any press coverage in the future, and when they refused to do so, they were transferred to the Sarghana police station .

On March 8 ,the National Security Directorate in Najaf Governorate arrested" NRT Arabia "reporter Hossam Al Kaabi over comments he posted on social media, before he was released the next day (March 9 .(

In another incident, an unknown force raided at dawn of 25 July the house of the Egyptian journalist, Hani Al-Baroudi, editor-in-chief of Al-Barq News Agency, in the Yarmouk area, west of Baghdad, and took him to an unknown destination.

*Blocking websites/services

Iraq topped the Arab countries in terms of the number of public and private terrestrial channels operating in the country after 2003. The government-funded Iraqi Media Network) IMN) involves a number of TV channels, radio stations, newspapers and daily and weekly magazines. The network is managed by a board of trustees whose members are appointed by the powerful parties and are given pensions after the end of their term .

As for the private TV channels, they are completely controlled by the armed groups, powerful parties, and influential figures in government. Therefore, we find that the weak Iraqi government rarely blocks these channels.

As for the Egyptian" NileSat "satellite, it blocked on March 3" Al-Ibaa "News TV which broadcasts from the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, for airing pictures of Iraqi resistance operations against the US occupation in 2003.

With regard to the Internet and social media, the Iraqi authorities cut off internet services and blocked social networking websites in some areas, blaming what they described as" rioters ."

For example, during October 2019 protests, the Iraqi authorities sought to ban the pictures and videos that expose their violent attacks on protesters and their attempts to ban communication among them .

A day after the eruption of protests on the first of October, the Iraqi authorities blocked most social media websites before it cut off the internet services, blaming what they

described as" rioters "and leaving protesters with no means of communication but the telephone calls.

*Assaults

Killing journalists and opinion activists and launching armed attacks on media facilities are the preferred methods of the corruption networks in Iraq to restrict freedom of expression, and these methods continued to be commonly used throughout 2019. For instance, human rights activist Hanaa Adour was hit by a speeding car on June 14 after delivering a speech on the anniversary of the fall of Mosul City in downtown Baghdad, in which she stressed the need for bringing to account those responsible for Spyker incident which claimed the lives of 1700 Iraqi fighters. She also tackled the fall of the city of Mosul at the hands of ISIS.

In the evening of 16 October, NRT TV channel reporter Amanj Babani, his wife and fellow journalist, and their child were shot dead in a hail of bullets by unknown gunmen while they were in their car near Family Mall in the city of Sulaymaniyah (355 km northeast of the capital, Baghdad). The assailants then fled the scene without being chased or facing any difficulty .

Three satellite channels were burned out by unknown masked men. On 5 October, some arsonists set fire to" Tigris) "Degla) TV headquarters after tying the building's guards and attacking them .An armed group also raided the headquarters of NRT Arabic TV, smashed all equipment and severely beat the employees after attacking the police officers around the building. On the same day, unknown gunmen in black cars stormed the headquarters of the Saudi Al-Hadath News Channel office in Abu Nawas Street in the capital Baghdad, destroyed some equipment and telephones, and assaulted the journalists present at the time.

In another violation, Ahmed al-Zawiti, director of the Al-Jazeera office in Iraqi Kurdistan, was beaten by the anti-terrorist forces on July 17, while he was covering the assassination of Turkish diplomats in a restaurant in the city of Erbil .

On 25 September, the Iraqi security forces violently dispersed the protest sit-in organized by a group of high certificate holders in front of the office of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, in the Al-Alawi area, center of Baghdad, demanding installation in their jobs. The dispersal of the sit-in resulted in the injury of a number of protesters along with the journalists who were covering the incident .

With the escalation of the protests that erupted in a number of Iraqi cities on the first of October denouncing the poor public services, widespread corruption and lack of employment opportunities, the security forces fired live ammunition and tear gas canisters at protesters leaving about 104 of them dead and more than 6,100 wounded till the 6th of October(4) .

*Intimidation

Armed groups and Iraqi authorities always use intimidation as an attempt to silence free media and voices critical of the government's performance. For example, on 3 July,

Lieutenant General Qassem Nazzal, al-Basra Operations Commander, threatened the journalists covering the protests witnessed by the blighted city to imprison them if they continue covering what he deemed "unlicensed" protests(5) .

Also, on 6 July, independent journalist Haider Al-Hamdani announced that he had received a series of threats after being tracked by unknown people who traced him at the Rumaiitha district in Al-Muthanna governorate .These threats came after al-Hamdani criticized the poor services in the city, emphasized the need to end negative phenomena and provide life necessities to citizens(6) .

In the same context ,unidentified gunmen in a white car targeted the house of journalist Fadel Omar, a reporter for" Kurdistan TV "channel affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP ,(at Qaladza district (160 km northeast of Sulaimaniyah), after opening fire at him in the evening of August 9(7) .

Fifth: The most common accusations against freedom of expression

Armed groups and corruption networks in Iraq do not need to level charges or hold trials – even if they are sham- to suppress critical voices that seek to expose their corruption. These groups have so far contented themselves with resorting to violence to crackdown on dissidents. However, there are some remaining accusations that are still being used, including" bias and defamation" ,"inciting violence and terrorism" ,"secretly taking picture "and" covering unlicensed protests."

Sixth: Victims

The victims of freedom of speech suppression during 2019 numbered in the thousands, including those who were killed and injured in protests, along with media institutions, journalists and social media activists. The following can be mentioned by way of example :

-About 104 people were killed and 6,000 wounded following their participation in the protests took place in October 2019 denouncing the poor public services, widespread corruption and lack of employment opportunities, in addition to the attack on the group of high certificate holders who organized a sit-in in front of the Prime Minister center's office in center Baghdad, and the closure of" Al-Ibaa "News TV and the US-funded Al-Hurra TV's regional office.

The list of victims also include: the guards of the" Tigris "TV channel building in Baghdad, employees of the Arabic NRT channel, and journalists working for the Saudi Al-Hadath news channel in the capital city .

This is in addition to the following:

The Kurdish NRT television channel's presenter Amanj Babani and his wife and their young son, Haider Al-Hamdani Al-Karar, photojournalist for" ANA Arabia" ,"Tigris ")Degla) TV reporter Hassan Issa, Al-Mawsaliya TV channel's reporter Ziyad Tariq Bashir, photojournalist Ahmed Amjad Hamid" ,Tigris) "Degla) TV reporter Anas Youssef and the channel's cameraman Ahmed Mohamed" ,NRT Arabia "reporter in Najaf Hossam Al

Kaabi, Egyptian journalist, Hani Al-Baroudi, editor-in-chief of Al-Barq News Agency, Ahmed Al-Zawiti, director of the Al-Jazeera office in Iraqi Kurdistan, independent journalist Haider Al-Hamdani and journalist and" Kurdistan TV "channel reporter Fadel Omar .

Footnotes

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Kuwait

Introduction

The geographical location of Kuwait and its affiliation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as well as its government's neutral stance on the conflict between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on the other hand, have played a significant role in portraying a positive image of the country. However, this image didn't prevent social media activists from expressing their views on Kuwait's internal situation and voicing their criticism towards the stance taken by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, a matter that authorities in Kuwait met with detention, trials and smear campaigns.

Moreover, the growing right-wing movements such as "Group 80"- a lobby group calls for giving priority in employment to Kuwaiti citizens by confronting any amendments to the citizenship law to guarantee the Bidoon (stateless) rights- in addition to the expansion of administrative corruption and the suppression of social media activists, have led to the spread of fake accounts on social media platforms.

First: Legislative and legal developments

The National Assembly committees discussed a number of bills, including the amendments to the Law No. 3 of 2006 on Press and Publications. Also, the Legislative Committee issued its report on a draft law regarding the right to information, but despite all such discussions, the Parliament has not yet issued laws pertaining to freedom of opinion and expression in Kuwait.⁽¹⁾

Besides that, on 31 July 2019, the Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Khaled Al-Jarrah issued a regulation stipulating the use of firearms and gunfire rules for security men; as he allowed shooting protesters at their feet, provided that it causes a non-fatal injury.⁽²⁾

Second: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

The issue of "Bidoon" or stateless people in Kuwait still remains unresolved and political parties are still using it to gain votes in parliamentary elections. As a result, citizens who are deprived of their nationality are still paying the price by wasting their lives, dignity and reputation in order to attain the right to citizenship and enjoy equality with their compatriots. But the Kuwaiti government seems determined that this group of people must remain victim of discrimination, and that if they attempt to speak out or complain about their suffering or object to such violations, they will be met with suppression.

On 12 July, the security forces arrested a number of Kuwaiti human rights activists who advocate for the rights of "Bidoon" and referred them to the Central Prison, against the backdrop of organizing a sit-in demanding the Bidoon rights. The sit-in protest was a

response to the death of Ayed Hamad Moudath, a young boy who committed suicide on the 7th of July due to his frustration after being denied identification papers that would allow him to study, work, and obtain access to public services. Among the detainees who were arrested at the time is the prominent Bidoon rights defender Abdul Hakim Al-Fadhli. The other incarcerated activists are: Ahmed al-Onan, Awad al-Onan, Abdullah al-Fadhi, Mutaib al-Onan, Mohammed Khudair al-Anzi, Yousif al-Osmi, Nawaf al-Bader, Hamid Jamil, Yousif al-Bashing, Jarallah al-Fadhli, Ahmed Shaya al-Anzi, and Alaa Al-Saadoun who was released after a member of the National Assembly mediated to free her.

One of the cases that caught the public's attention during 2019 is the case of "social media's fake accounts", as it was taken to the corridors of the National Assembly after Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah stressed the need to pass legislation to control social media platforms that are flooded with fake accounts.

Another case that attracted the public opinion attention in Kuwait is the case of "Atij Al-Masyan" account's owner who tackled the issue of "forged certificates", until on July 21 it was reported that he was arrested on a charge of insulting Twitter users and public figures.

Also the case of Kuwait's deportation of Egyptians accused of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood group had been a complex subject of controversy, as Kuwaiti authorities extradited on 15 July 2019 eight Egyptian opponents to their country despite the grave risks of torture and persecution they might be subjected to in Egypt.

Third: Violations of freedom of expression

Violations of freedom of opinion and expression in Kuwait took many forms, including trials, assaults, detention, and intimidation campaigns. These violations were largely centered against social media activists and Bidoon rights defenders.

*** Assaults**

On 23 July 2019, a force of unidentified persons kidnapped prominent journalist and Bidoon rights defender Hammoud Al-Rabah, while he was with his wife in a restaurant in downtown Kuwait City. Afterwards, Hammoud appeared in the Prosecution's headquarters for investigation pending one of Bidoon rights defenders' cases. (3)

*** Detention**

Detention is the second tool used by the authorities in Kuwait to curb freedom of speech in the country. On 19 March 2019, the security forces raided the headquarters of "Al-Hadaf" magazine and arrested its director Mazen Al-Tarazi, a Syrian businessman living in Kuwait, along with four of his assistants. The magazine's computers, cameras and the personal phones of Al-Tarazi were also confiscated. The security forces released Al-Tarazi and his aides after spending 3 days in detention under no charges.

On May 20, the Kuwaiti authorities arrested activist and former candidate of the National Assembly Muhammad Khalid Al-Hajri, to implement a three-year prison

sentence for allegedly insulting Saudi Arabia and Prince Muhammad bin Salman on social media.

On June 28, the security services arrested politician and former member of the National Assembly Nasser Al-Duwailah, for allegedly insulting Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of comments posted on "Twitter". The Prosecution then released him on bail two days after his arrest.

On July 12, the security services also arrested more than 14 of Bidoon (stateless people) rights defenders and referred them to the Central Prison after they organized a sit-in protest to demand Bidoon rights after the tragic news of Ayed Hamad Moudath committing suicide had been confirmed.

On July 21, the authorities announced the arrest of the fake account's owner Atij Al-Masyan over charges of "insulting the status of the Emir", "broadcasting false news about the country's internal situation", "disclosing job secrets" and "misusing phones".

* Trials

Kuwaiti courts have witnessed many cases related to freedom of opinion, expression and publication at the various phases of litigation. The use of the judiciary is considered the most severe form of violations committed against freedom of expression in the country throughout the year of 2019, where hundreds of trials took place involving several of Twitter activists for voicing their views on social media. Among these trials is the trial of columnist Ahmad Al-Sarraf, who writes for the Kuwaiti daily newspaper "Al-Qabas". Al-Sarraf was brought to court over an article deemed "offensive to Iran", however, the Court of Cassation ordered, on 10 March, the acquittal of the writer after ruling that his article doesn't constitute any violation of the law nor does it abuse freedom of opinion and expression guaranteed by the constitution.

On Thursday, 14 March, the Court of Cassation ruled to exclude citizen "Saleh Jarman" from the lists of candidates running for the supplementary elections of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, against the backdrop of a ruling previously handed down to him over a protest case. The court pointed out that the suspended 2-year prison sentence it handed to Jarman in 2017 had made him not eligible to run for election since he doesn't meet one of its legal requirements.

During the same month (on 19 March), the Kuwaiti Criminal Court sentenced Kuwaiti writer Abdallah Al-Hadlaq to three years in prison with labor, on charges of "inciting sectarian strife" against the backdrop of a tweet he posted earlier. The tweet was followed by a complaint filed against him by the Department of Cyber Crime and the two lawyers Ali Al-Ali and Khalil Al-Tabakh.

The repercussions of the "Enough Nonsense" Speech delivered in 2012 by Kuwaiti former parliamentarian Musallam al-Barrak at El-Irada Square, adjacent to the National Assembly (Parliament), and were promoted by many politicians and activists, still continued during the year. On May 6, 2019, the Court of Appeal upheld the two-year prison sentence issued against a number of citizens, on charges of "insulting the Emir,

challenging his authority and undermining his status", with the suspension of the sentence's execution for 3 years, for promoting the aforementioned speech.

The month of May also saw several trials related to freedom of speech. On May 9, the Court of Cassation ordered the acquittal of activist Tariq al-Mutairi from the charge of insulting Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of a tweet he shared via his "Twitter" account.

During the same month, on May 27, the Kuwaiti Criminal Court sentenced, in absentia, Kuwaiti activists and bloggers Musaed al- Mosaiem and Abdullah Al-Saleh to five years in prison with force and labor; for allegedly "carrying out a hostile act against UAE, insulting the status of the Emir, spreading false news and misusing mobile phone", owing to some comments they posted on their Twitter accounts addressing the United Arab Emirates.

The month of June 2019 also witnessed the trial of singer Khalid Al Mulla over insulting the judiciary. But, on June 17, Kuwait's media prosecution ordered the release of Al-Mulla and the general manager of "ATV" TV channel Ahmad Al Fadhli under a personal guarantee, in the case filed by the Ministry of Information along with a judge suing the two men. The lawsuit was against the backdrop of a song performed by Al Mulla and aired by ATV addressing the issue of fraud in the society.

* Intimidation

As opposed to Bidoon rights advocacy groups, some groups emerged in 2019 with the aim to encroach on the rights of minorities and suppress whoever defends them. These groups are launching a smear campaign against Bidoon rights defenders, discrediting them and accusing them of treason in order to intimidate them and crackdown on their right to express the demands and rights of such deprived and underprivileged people (Bidoon). For instance, academic and human rights defender Dr. Ibtihal Al-Khatib had been accused of insulting Kuwait and its leader (emir), aside from breaching her privacy by publishing information about her personal life and family by some accounts on Twitter. Such an intimidation campaign against Al- Khatib followed a speech she delivered at a seminar held by the Democratic Forum on April 10 under the theme "A spotlight on the Bidoon issue" in which she spoke out against the ongoing violations committed against the Bidoon community. This smear campaign also targeted other human rights defenders, such as Hadeel Buqris and Youssef Bouhamd.

The Department of Cyber Crime had previously summoned human rights defenders Abdel Hakim al-Fadli and Khalifa al-Anzi to interrogate them over using their Twitter accounts to incite people to demonstrate in front of the Central Agency to call for addressing the Bidoon situation and resolving their issue. The department also questioned Hamid Jamil over allegations of using a fake account on Twitter to attack the "Group 80" members.

Human rights defenders Anwar Al-Rouqi and Karima Karam had also been subjected to interrogation and intimidation over their views they share on Twitter.

Fourth: The most common accusations against freedom of expression

There is a long list of the most common charges that are being used in Kuwait to restrict the right to freedom of opinion and expression, most prominent of which are:

Calling for an unauthorized gathering, joining an unauthorized gathering, misusing mobile phones, toppling the regime, insulting the Emir, spreading false news, undermining the status of the Emir, insulting the judiciary, disclosing job secrets, and stirring sectarian strife.

Fifth: Victims

To name just a few, the list of victims of freedom of expression in Kuwait is topped by 15 detained activists and advocates of stateless people's rights. They are: Abdul Hakim Al-Fadhli, Ahmedal-Onan, Anwad al-Onan, , Mutaib al-Onan, Abdullah al-Fadhli, Mohammed Khudair al-Anzi, Yousif al-Osmi, Nawaf al-Bader, Hamid Jamil, Yousif al-Bashing, Jarallah al-Fadhli, Ahmed Shaya al-Anzi, Hammoud Al-Rabah, Khalifa Al-Anzi, and Reda Al-Fadhli. The list of victims includes also: human rights defenders Dr. Ibtihal Al-Khatib, Hadeel Bou Qurais, Youssef Bou Hamad, Abdel-Hakim Al-Fadhli, Hamid Jamil, and Alaa Al-Saadoun, in addition to: former MP Musallam al-Barrak, Abdullah Al-Saleh, singer Khaled Al-Mulla, and Salem Al-Dossary, aka "Abu Rifaa".

Footnotes

1. A news report published on "Al-Anbaa" website entitled "Legislative": Canceling the pre-censorship of imported books"- Published on: June 9, 2019- Last accessed date: September 27, 2019- <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/parliament/906959/09-06-2019-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%A9/>
2. A news report published in "Al-Shorouk" newspaper entitled "Kuwaiti newspaper: Interior allows security men to shoot at the feet of demonstrators and fugitives"- Published on: July 31, 2019- Last accessed date: September 28, 2019- <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=31072019&id=35124aeb-ee54-469e-9b79-477789ca6417>
3. A statement published on the Gulf Center for Human Rights website entitled "Kuwait: prominent activist and journalist Hammoud Al-Rabah abducted over a tweet"- Published on July 24, 2019- Last accessed date: September 27, 2019- <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2174>

Algeria

First: Introduction

The deteriorating state of freedom of opinion and expression in Algeria during 2019 was the main push that led to the outbreak of the people's revolution to end the autocratic rule of Bouteflika and his political factions that plundered much of the country's wealth and suppressed all the opposing views. On February 22, protesters broke all the barriers of fear and took to the streets in massive protests to denounce President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term in the elections scheduled for April 18, 2019. Although protesters came out in large numbers, the rallies remained peaceful .

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Algeria's longest-serving president, had been in power since 1999 and had ruled for four consecutive presidential terms. The 81-year-old had made very few public appearances since suffering a debilitating stroke in 2013 that left him largely incapacitated.

Despite the increasing number of protests pertaining to the deteriorating economic situation, Algeria had not been affected by the first wave of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. Bouteflika ,ruled the country for nearly two decades, announced his resignation in the evening of April 2, 2019 handing his resignation letter to the Constitutional Council's President Tayeb Belaiz. Consequently, on 9 April 2019 ,Algeria's parliament officially confirmed Senate President Abdelkader Bensalah as the acting head of state for 90 days after declaring the presidency vacant following Bouteflika's resignation .

Second: Legislative and legal developments

After the eruption of the revolution in Algeria on February 22 and the fall of Bouteflika on the 2nd of April, the parliament did not discuss any laws that are directly related to freedom of opinion and expression, rather; it responded to the demands raised by the Algerian popular protest movement" Hirak "and discussed laws related to the enhancement of transparency and the fight against corruption, besides laws and measures regarding the establishment of an independent national electoral authority and the enactment of a new election law.

Accordingly, the Algerian parliament, in its two chambers (the People's National Assembly and the National Assembly) adopted on the 12th and 13th of September 2019 by a majority a bill on the creation of the Independent National Electoral Authority in charge of elections for the first time in the country's history, in addition to making amendments to the electoral law⁽¹⁾ .

Also, on Monday, 14 October 2019, the Algerian Cabinet approved a bill prohibiting retired military personnel from running for elections or engaging in any political activity for a period of 5 years after the termination of service, although it still maintains their right to vote in elections.

Third: Cases with the most impact on freedom of expression

There are many cases that gained the public opinion's attention during the year, including: holding an Amazigh flag during a 21 June 2019 protest, resulting in the arrest of 19 protesters on a charge of "threatening national unity" "causing national controversy in the public sphere .

Also, the death of human rights activist Kamal Eddine Fakhar on May 28 owing to some health complications, as a result of entering a hunger strike to protest against his imprisonment because of "Facebook" posts, is among the critical cases that brought to the public opinion the issue of prisoners of conscience and led to all demonstrations calling for their release(2) .

Public opinion was also concerned about the security forces' violent intervention to break up a sit-in staged by a number of unemployed individuals in Tenerkuk district of Adrar province, south of the capital on May 14, as violent clashes erupted between the police and protesters leaving many seriously wounded .

Fourth: Violations against freedom of expression

Banning activities

On April 25, the Faculty of Political Science department at the University of Algiers III banned a seminar for teachers that was planned to be organized to discuss the "democratic transition in Algeria ,"before the administration shut down all the faculty's halls without giving any clear reasons.

In another incident, a National Gendarmerie officer, tasked with closing the ring axis in Jabal al-Wahsh neighborhood in the city of Constantine, prevented a journalist working for " El-Khabar "newspaper from covering a huge bushfire that broke out in Jabal al-Wahsh forest on the 3rd of August, while he allowed the other journalists to cover the incident .

Blocking websites/ services

The Algerian authorities have been able to put pressure on independent newspapers and television channels to prevent them from reporting news truthfully and on time and from opening the door to critical voices. As a consequence, there has been an apparent need to resort to news websites which use new technologies such as live-streaming, besides social media platforms that convey information to the public as simply and honestly as possible. In response, the authorities in Algeria turned to blocking these websites to limit their noticeable impact on shaping public opinion .

For example, Lounas Kaddam, the director of the Algerian news website (TSA" (Tout Sur l'Algérie) "All about Algeria) announced, on June 12, that the website has been blocked in Algeria (but it stills works outside the country) because of its coverage of the protest movement in Algeria.

In solidarity with the blocked websites, a group of young people organized, on 17 June, a protest in Algiers as they held a minute of silence in which they muzzled their mouths with their hands as a way to demonstrate their objection to the ban .

Algeria's communications ministry had also blocked access to social networking websites "Facebook", "Twitter", "Instagram", "Youtube" and "WhatsApp" since the 16th of June 2019, a move Algerian authorities say is aimed at preventing cheating at exams and fighting test leaks onto social media websites. In a related context, the state-run Algeria Telecom blocked, in the evening of August 8, YouTube and many of Google's services in Algeria. The ban came after the publication of a video where Algeria's ex-defense minister Khaled Nezzar addressed "members of the National People's Army" calling on them to "realize the demands of the people", which was interpreted as a call for the public to oust military leader Ahmed Gaid Salah.

Assaults

The Algerian authorities used violence in an attempt to control or suppress peaceful activities and restrict the right to speech. For instance, on April 17, a security force stormed Algiers University's Faculty of Law in the Algerian capital, where students and professors took part in a seminar about their contribution to the Algerian popular protest movement "Hirak". "The university's board, however, denied in a statement having any contact with the security forces or that it granted them permission to enter the campus.

On 14 May, security forces broke up a sit-in staged by a number of unemployed persons in Ténenkou district of Adrar province (about 800 km south of Algiers), before they arrested many of them resulting in violent clashes between the police and protesters, which left 14 policemen injured and four protesters seriously wounded.

In a similar incident, riot police broke up, on July 28, a sit-in by four unemployed youth in front of the Ghazi Baroua in Adrar province, against the backdrop of employment demands after all solutions and mediation attempts between unemployed and recruitment agencies had been exhausted.

Regarding the situation of public protests and the state of distrust in the Algerian authorities, a number of students and protesters in Algeria stormed, on Saturday August 17, the headquarters of National Dialogue Management Committee at Al-Arabi Bin Mahdi Street in Algiers, where a seminar were held by a number of the committee's members to announce the formation of its advisory committee. The protesting students accused the committee members of "betraying the will of the people, and turning back the peaceful gift for which the Algerians came out since 22 February."

It is worth noting that Algeria's National Commission for Dialogue and Mediation is a non-governmental commission formed on July 25, 2019, at the initiative of the transitional president, Abdul Qadir bin Saleh.

With regard to the attack on journalists and media workers, Hisham Hammel, head of the Algeria Press Service (APS) office in Tapaza (west of the capital), was attacked by a group of protesters on Friday, April 19, while covering the 9th consecutive Friday March in Tapaza; over claims that women were photographed without their permission.

Moreover, Mustapha Bendjama, editor-in-chief of local daily "La Provincial", was slapped and punched by members of police intelligence, on June 28, in the northeastern town of Annaba, where he was covering a protest via his Facebook account.

In Cairo Egypt, journalist Rafik, correspondent for "El-Khabar" Algerian newspaper, who was tasked to cover Algeria national football team's participation in the African Cup of Nations "Alcan" in Egypt, was attacked on the 4th of July by the Algerian national team's assistant director, Lamine Abdi; after the journalist criticized the performance of the President of the Algerian Football Association, Khair Eddine Zouche.

Also, on October 5, security forces assaulted journalist Mohamed Jarrada, Al-Hurra TV channel correspondent, while he was taking pictures of a gathering attended by dozens of people to commemorate the 31st anniversary of the October 5, 1988 uprising. The reporter, along with the accompanying cameraman, were detained inside one of the security forces' vehicles for a period of time before seizing their mobile phones and cameras and deleting what they had filmed .

Detention

Detention is one of the most common methods used by the Algerian authorities to restrict freedom of expression, but it didn't prevent human rights activist Kamal Eddine Fakhar from expressing his objection to injustice until he died on May 28 at "Franz Fanon Hospital" in Balida, 50 km from the capital, after suffering some health complications as a result of entering a hunger strike to protest his imprisonment over "Facebook" posts.

Many human rights activists were also subjected to detention. For example, on 31 May, police forces arrested a number of protesters and activists to prevent them from demonstrating outside the Grand Post Office in Algiers, at the time many Algerian people took to the streets to demonstrate on the 15th Friday of the popular movement witnessed by the country since 22 February.

The authorities also arrested Ahmed Benchemsi, the Advocacy and Communications Director for Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division, on Friday, August 9, during his participation in the protests calling for the departure of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's regime's symbols .Benchemsi was released a day after his arrest .

On the other hand ,the investigating judge at the Sidi Mohamed Court in Algiers ruled, on September 29, to hold Ahsan Qadi and Karim Bouta in pretrial detention after charging them with " distributing leaflets that would harm the country's national interest."

On October 9, security forces in " Wadi "region arrested Farouq Qadir, Abd al-Ali bin Omar and Karam Shabro, for allegedly" obstruction and contempt of a public institution, libel and defamation, and taking pictures ,"against the backdrop of their participation in a protest sit-in organized by an association for the unemployed in front of one of the recruitment agencies .

Trials

In addition to the incarceration of protesters and activists, the Algerian authorities have used numerous means to curb the weekly protests that had continued throughout the year .

With regard to corruption cases that were considered during Bouteflika's era, the former Minister of Culture Ezzedine Mihoubi announced, on April 27, his appeal to the judiciary accusing Abdelali Mzghish, a journalist at the public television, of defamation and slander; after he posted a photo on his Facebook page that shows Mihoubi meeting with tycoon Kamal al-Bouchi, who is detained over a Cocaine case, while they were preparing to hold a football match.

In another case that had drawn considerable attention and controversy from the public, the investigating judges ordered, on Sunday 23 June, the detention of 18 protesters in the Algerian capital and one protester in Bejaia province, a port city east of Algiers, after they were arrested during the 21 June protests on charges of " :undermining national unity "through bearing a flag other than the Algerian national flag and" insulting a statutory body "against the backdrop of brandishing the Amazigh flag during the protests(3) .

Furthermore, lawyer and human rights activist Ramzy Shakhab received, on the first of August, a subpoena through a phone call from the Cybercrime Police affiliated to the Khenchela Province Security, informing him that the Public Prosecution had referred him to trial on a charge of" inciting to protest "via social media. The summons came after the lawyer posted, on the 4th of February, a 4-minute video on his account on Facebook announcing his rejection to the then-President Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term .

On September 26, the investigating judge at Bir Mourad Rais Court in the capital Algiers ruled to hold Sofiane Marrakchi, correspondent for TV channel Al-Mayadeen, in pretrial detention, on charges of" The introduction of equipment used for live broadcasting without a license and customs evasion ."

Fifth: Most common accusations against freedom of expression

The majority of the charges used to restrict freedom of expression during 2019 are directly related to social protests, most prominent of which are" :inciting gatherings , " "undermining national unity through bearing a flag other than the Algerian national flag" ,"insulting a statutory body" ,"obstruction and contempt of a public institution , " and" distributing leaflets that would harm the country's national interest ."

This is in addition to the accusations commonly used in the past against journalists and social media activists such as" ;libel and defamation" ,"taking pictures" ,"introducing equipment without a license "and" customs evasion."

Sixth: Victims

The list of victims of freedom of expression in Algeria in 2019 included anti-government protesters, human rights defenders, and journalists, besides the news websites, as follows: human rights activist Kamal Eddine Fakhra, lawyer and human rights activist Ramzy Shakhbat, along with peaceful gatherings activists Farouq Qadiry, Abd al-Ali bin Omar and Karam Shabro, and journalists Mohamed Jarrada, Al-Hurra TV channel correspondent, Mustapha Bendjama- editor-in-chief of local daily "La Provinciale" and Sofiane MARRAKCHI, and media worker Abdelali MZGHISH, in addition to those who participated in the sit-ins of the unemployed people at Tenekuk and Ghazi Baroia districts in Adrar province. The list also included the Algerian news website (TSA) (Tout Sur l'Algérie) "All about Algeria".

Footnotes

1. A news report on Anadolu Agency website, entitled "The Algerian Parliament Approves Legal Provisions for the Elections" - Published on :September 13, 2019- Last accessed date :October 27, 2019 - [https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/ Arab-Countries / Algerian-Parliament-Approves-Legal-Texts-Elections-1582964](https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/Arab-Countries/Algerian-Parliament-Approves-Legal-Texts-Elections-1582964)
2. A news report published on DW website, titled "How the death of Amazigh rights activist" Fakhra "influences the Hirak movement in Algeria" - Published on May 29, 2019- Last accessed date: October 26, 2019 - [https://www.dw.com/en/Any-effect-of-death-of-human-Amazigh-pottery-on-the-movement-Algeria / a-48963943](https://www.dw.com/en/Any-effect-of-death-of-human-Amazigh-pottery-on-the-movement-Algeria/a-48963943)
3. An investigative report entitled "Lawyer Fottah Sadat: The regime uses the story of the Amazigh flag to break the unity of the Algerian people" - Published on "June 25, 2019, Last accessed date: October 26, 2019 - <https://www.france24.com/ar/20190625-Algeria-Raya-Amazigh-Imprisonment-Temporary-Protest-Mobility-Demonstration>