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2017 Press Freedom Index – ever darker world map

The 2017 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) shows an increase in the number of countries where the media freedom situation is very grave and highlights the scale and variety of the obstacles to media freedom throughout the world.

The World Press Freedom map is getting darker. The global indicator calculated by RSF has never been so high, which means that media freedom is under threat now more than ever. Three more countries sank into the darkest depths of the Index in 2017: Burundi (down 4 at 160th), Egypt (down 2 at 161st) and Bahrain (down 2 at 164th).

A total of 21 countries are now colored black on the press freedom map because the situation there is classified as “very bad,” and 51 (two more than last year) are colored red, meaning that the situation in these countries is classified as “bad.” In all, the situation has worsened in nearly two thirds (62.2%) of the 180 countries in the Index.

I. Additions to the black list

Ranked 160th out of 180 in the 2017 Index after falling four places, Burundi is the first of the 21 countries in the black zone. President Pierre Nkurunziza launched a fierce crackdown in 2015 against media outlets that covered a coup attempt after his decision to run for a third term. Burundi is now locked in a crisis and media freedom is dying. Charged with supporting the coup, dozens of journalists have fled into exile. For those that remain, working is almost impossible without toeing the government line. The all-powerful National Intelligence Service (SNR) interrogates, arrests, and mistreats reporters and editors at will. Editors are told to “correct” articles that cause displeasure. No holds are barred in the regime’s war on any form of opposition or criticism. Information is manipulated and journalists are beaten. One journalist, Jean Bigirimana, has disappeared.

Egypt and Bahrain, prisons for journalists

The other two countries that have entered the Index’s black zone are both from the region with the worst score – the Middle East. Many journalists have been imprisoned in both countries– 24 in Egypt and 14 in Bahrain – and they both detain their journalists for very long periods of time.

In Egypt (down 2 at 161st), Mahmoud Abou Zeid, a photojournalist also known as Shawkan, has been held arbitrarily for more than three years without being tried. His crime was to have covered the violent dispersal of a demonstration organized by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is now branded as a terrorist organization. Freelancer Ismail Alexandrani has been in pre-trial detention since November 2015 although a judge ordered his release in November 2016. Regardless of the

law, the regime led with an iron fist by Gen. Al-Sisi tolerates no criticism, suppresses protests, shamelessly erodes media pluralism, attacks the journalists' union, and encourages self-censorship amongst reporters on a daily basis.

The situation is no better in the Kingdom of Bahrain (down 2 at 164th), which is back in the black zone where it always was, except for a brief respite in 2016. Dissidents or independent commentators such as Nabeel Rajab, the head of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, pay a high price for daring to criticize the authorities in tweets or interviews. The regime intensified its repressive methods in 2011, when it feared it might be overthrown. Any content or media suspected of posing a threat to the country's unity is simply suppressed, and detained journalists face the possibility of long jail terms or even life imprisonment.

II. The last of the last

At the other end of the black zone, three countries have monopolized the last three places for the past 12 years. Ever since the 2005 Index, North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Eritrea have consistently suppressed and crushed all divergence from the state propaganda.

Eritrea (up 1 at 179th) has for the first time in ten years relinquished the bottom place to North Korea, even if there has been no fundamental change in the situation in this aging dictatorship where freely reported news and information have long been banned. The media, like the entire society, are still totally under President Issayas Afewerki's arbitrary thumb. The Eritrean government continues to enforce lifetime conscription and to detain dozens of political prisoners and journalists arbitrarily. In 2016, a few foreign media crews were nonetheless allowed into the country to do reports, under close escort.

North Korea (down 1 at 180th), now ranked last in the Index, has also shown more flexibility towards the foreign media. More foreign reporters have been allowed to cover official events and, in September 2016, Agence France-Presse was even able to open a bureau in Pyongyang. These developments might give the impression of more openness, but in fact there is no desire for real change. The information available to the foreign media is still meticulously controlled and the population is kept in ignorance and terror. Listening to a radio station based outside the country can lead straight to a concentration camp. North Korea continues to be a Cold War-era dictatorship.

Turkmenistan, another hangover from a previous era, has held on to its 178th position. Any criticism of the Arkadag ("Father Protector") is inconceivable in this former Soviet Republic. The state has total control over the media and continues to intensify its harassment of the few remaining correspondents of foreign-based independent media, who are forced to work clandestinely. The government has continued its campaign to remove all satellite dishes, denying the public of one of its last chances to access freely reported news.

III. Predators on all continents

Former Soviet republics have produced many of the dictators found on the Index. Examples include Azerbaijan (up 1 at 162nd), where trumped-up charges are used to jail journalists, and Uzbekistan (down 3 at 169th), which is a model of in-

stitutionalized censorship although the new president's behavior has raised hopes of improvement after the widespread use of torture under his predecessor.

In Asia, China (176th), Vietnam (175th), and Laos (170th) have always languished near the bottom of the Index alongside North Korea (180th). But that is not all they have in common. They are all also totalitarian communist regimes in which journalists take their orders from the Party and, in China especially, citizen journalists and bloggers are prosecuted and jailed if they dare to offer the least criticism of the Party-State.

From totalitarianism to autocracy

The perpetuation of a Soviet-style communist regime is the reason why Cuba (down 2 at 173rd) is more hostile to media freedom than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. The state's monopoly of news and information did not end with the death of Fidel Castro, who will be remembered not only as the father of the Cuban revolution but also as one of the planet's worst press freedom predators.

Aside from Eritrea and Burundi, already mentioned, three of the other four African countries in the Index's black zone have regimes that are at the very least autocratic if not brutal dictatorships. Both Omar al-Bashir in Sudan (174th) and Teodoro Obiang Nguema in Equatorial Guinea (down 3 at 171st) constantly crack down on the least dissent in order to hold on to the power they acquired by force in the last century. Both are on RSF's list of press freedom predators and both continued, in various ways, to curtail freedom of information, expression, and thought in 2016. In Djibouti, which held on to its 172nd position in the 2017 Index, President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh has also deployed a significant repressive arsenal against the media. After steadily depriving his country of independent and opposition media, the iron-fisted Guelleh found it fairly easy to amend the constitution in order to run for a fourth consecutive term.

Defense of religion, morality, and the established order are the grounds usually given in the Middle East for violating media freedom. The Islamic Republic of Iran (up 4 at 165th) imprisons journalists arbitrarily by the dozens on the pretext of combatting "obscenity" or threats to national security. Prison conditions are so bad that many of them go on hunger strike in protest. The Iranian regime imposes inhuman and medieval punishments such as flogging. For "insulting Islam," Saudi Arabia (down 3 at 168th) also sentenced the blogger Raif Badawi to flogging as well as ten years in prison. Both King Salman bin Abdulaziz, who took over the reins of the Saudi dynastic monarchy in 2015, and the Islamic Republic of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, hold distinguished positions in the ranks of RSF's press freedom predators.

IV. War and crises, also enemies of journalists

Dictatorships and other totalitarian regimes obviously throttle media freedom and pluralism, but wars and latent conflicts are also devastating and can quickly drive a country down into the lower regions of the Index and keep it there for years. Six years after the start of a bloody civil war, Syria is now the world's deadliest country for journalists and is stuck at its 177th position. Nothing has been done to protect journalists from the insane barbarity of its dictator and fanaticized Jihadi armed

groups that stop at nothing. Journalists are also caught in the crossfire in Yemen (166th). Even if fewer were killed in 2016, which accounts for Yemen's four-place rise, journalists risk being abducted and held hostage by the Houthi rebels or by Al-Qaeda. They also risk being killed in air strikes by the Saudi-led Arab coalition.

Chaos is equally dangerous for journalists in Libya (down 1 at 163rd), which is torn by armed clashes between rival factions and is on the verge of imploding. Three more journalists died in 2016 covering fighting in Sirte and Benghazi. Although the toll of dead and missing has fallen, journalists still face endless threats because crimes of violence against them go unpunished. So too in Somalia (167th), where the fragility of the state contributes to the dangers for journalists, who are the victims not only of shootings and bombings by Al-Shebaab, but also persecution by what remains of governmental authority.

V. A non-exhaustive black list

It is clear from the 2017 Index that the frequency of media freedom violations is on the rise (see our release entitled Tipping point?) and this is reflected inter alia in a 7% increase over the past five years in the number of countries located in the "red zone" (where the situation is classified as "bad"). This in turn suggests that a rapid increase in the number of countries in the "black zone" may also be imminent.

For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo – headed by Joseph Kabila, another press freedom predator – has been falling steadily since 2002, when it was ranked 113th in the first Index published by RSF. After falling two more places in the past year, it is ranked 154th in the 2017 Index and is steadily approaching the "black zone." Similarly, South Sudan (down 5 at 145th) has fallen more than 20 places in the past five years because of its civil war and seems to be heading inexorably down to join the countries in the worst category.

Turkey, Mexico, and Afghanistan in the downward spiral

Turkey is one of the most alarming cases in the 2017 Index. Ranked 155th after falling four more places in the past year, it has fallen a total of 56 places in the past 12 years. The coup attempt in July 2016 swept aside the last restraints on the government in its war against critical media. The ensuing state of emergency has allowed the authorities to disband dozens of media outlets at the stroke of pen month after month, reducing pluralism to a handful of low-circulation newspapers. More than 100 journalists have been detained without trial, turning Turkey into the world's biggest prison for media professionals.

Mexico is another country that stood out last year. Ranked 75th in RSF's 2002 Index, it has fallen almost 75 places in the past 15 years and is ranked 147th in the 2017 Index after 10 more journalists were murdered in 2016 (and another spate of killings in March 2017). It is riddled by corruption and violent organized crime, especially at the local level. In the states of Veracruz, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Tamaulipas, it is extremely dangerous for journalists to cover sensitive subjects, especially as impunity for crimes of violence against the media feeds a vicious circle that continues year after year.

In terms of level of risk for journalists, Mexico is nowadays only just behind Syria and Afghanistan, which is down 2 at 120th. The courageous efforts of Afghani-

stan's journalists and their determination to fulfil their reporting mission are frustrated by the constant decline in the security situation resulting from the Taliban and Islamic State insurrections, which have turned entire provinces into news and information "black holes." Only the government's declared readiness to create protective mechanisms for journalists has prevented Afghanistan from falling further in the Index.

