

RSF: Egypt Media freedom remains under attack

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Press freedom in Egypt remains shackled by a host of draconian laws, and state interference, NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in its annual worldwide index on press freedom issued yesterday.

"Since taking power in 1981, [President] Hosni Mubarak has gone all out to curb not just press freedom but also citizens' rights to freedom of information," the headline of RSF's Egypt section reads.

RSF's 2009 worldwide index measures "the degree of freedom that journalists and news organizations enjoy... and the efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom" during the period between Sept. 1, 2008 and Sept. 1 2009.

Questionnaires were sent out to RSF partner organizations, as well as journalists, researchers and human rights activists questioning them about violations directly affecting journalists as well as measures taken against the news media, such as censorship and banning of newspapers.

Egypt moved up three places this year ranking 143 out of 175 countries, with a score of 51.38. In 2008 Egypt's score was 50.25.

RSF says that independent opposition journalists must run the gauntlet of 32 articles penalizing the press in various laws and that despite these restrictions "Egyptian journalists do their utmost to roll back the limits imposed on them."

"Privately-owned opposition newspapers and the independent press compete for readers' attention at newsstands with the official government press. Despite the legal, administrative and financial pressures they hold their own," the report reads.

Online media has become a crucial alternative source of information RSF says, describing the Internet as "a refuge for freedom of expression."

RSF reports that Egypt has one of the highest rates of internet penetration in Africa, with 20 percent of the Egyptian population online according to the NGO.

But RSF adds that the Egyptian government has responded with measures aimed at monitoring Internet users who it regards as "a potential danger."

"Out of concern for its image abroad, Egypt decided long ago not to block websites. But it has started to tighten its grip again as the online craze has grown. Since 2008, it has changed the conditions for using wireless (Wi-Fi) internet, with users having to pay for their connection but also having to supply an email address to which the password and username

are sent."

Such actions, together with numerous incidents of bloggers being arrested for their online writing resulted in RSF earlier this year classifying Egypt amongst its list of 12 "internet enemies" -- countries which systematically repress internet users.

In addition, the New York-based Committee for the Protection of Journalists has placed Egypt in seventh place in its list of the world's top 10 backsliders on press freedom in 2008.

RSF also highlights the "campaign against independent television" launched by the Egyptian government at the start of 2008. It criticized Egypt's involvement in the Arab League Charter on satellite broadcasting, whose vaguely-worded provisions were seen as a tool for suppressing freedom of expression.

State-controlled satellite operator Nilesat monitors the content of channels it airs and in April 2008 stopped the transmission of Hewan channel, whose programs are often critical of Arab governments.

RSF has condemned this policy, comparing Egypt to Qatar "which allows Al-Jazeera considerable freedom in covering regional news."

RSF's roundup on Egypt warns against a draft law on audio-visual transmission it describes as "a threat to [broadcast] journalists."

The draft law lays down prison sentences for both broadcasters and ordinary media-users who violate its provisions.

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