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Reporters Without Borders

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**Evidence of Reporters Without Borders, an NGO with special consultative status, about
press freedom in TUNISIA**

Press freedom

Tunisia is one of the countries with least freedom of expression. The independent press is banned and the government controls the main media outlets. One or two opposition publications are allowed but they pay a price. They censor themselves, have a small circulation and copies are sometimes arbitrarily seized and the editors only told afterwards. The official media is the propaganda arm of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regime, which refuses to issue publishing licences to independent journalists. Only friends of the regime are allowed to start publications.

Many foreign papers and magazines, such as the French daily *Libération* and the Arabic daily *Al Hayat*, are banned from entering the country. Foreign journalists can go to Tunisia without much problem but once there are spied on by the secret police, whose visible presence aims to discourage contact with Tunisians.

Free flow of information online

Internet use is also curbed by the regime, which has modern technology to monitor online traffic under a 1998 postal law which allows the interception of any messages “undermining public order and national security.”

Lawyer Mohammed Abbou spent 28 months in prison for posting articles online criticising prison conditions in Tunisia. He was freed in July 2007 but has been barred from leaving the country.

Government efforts to improve the situation

The government is keen to improve its image abroad. Ben Ali's regime is seen by Western countries as a bulwark against the Islamist threat and so gets special treatment. The government has made no attempt to expand freedom of expression.

Cooperation with NGOs

Tunisian human rights groups are not officially recognised and have many problems. International organisations are rarely received by the authorities but can still enter the country. News is also controlled by blocking access to some websites that criticise the lack of freedom in the country, including those of several NGOs and Reporters Without Borders.

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders calls on the government to immediately and routinely provide receipts for all requests for a publishing licence. It also asks Tunisia's partners to put the human rights issue at the centre of their contacts.

Methods used

The material in this update was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a worldwide network of correspondents (in 130 countries) and partner organisations (in about 20).

Journalists in some countries can be sent to prison for several years just for a word or a photo that offends. Jailing or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens the right of each of us to be kept informed. Reporters Without Borders has been fighting day-by-day for press freedom since it was founded in 1985.

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