

Attacks on press freedom around the world are intensifying, index reveals

Annie Kelly, *The Guardian*, 3 May 2024

Political attacks on press freedom, including the detention of journalists, suppression of independent media outlets and widespread dissemination of misinformation, have significantly intensified in the past year, according to the annual World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

The index ranks 180 countries on the ability of journalists to work and report freely and independently.

5 In a year when more than half the world's population will go to the polls in democratic elections, the RSF's index shows an overall decline in press freedom globally and a steep rise in the political repression of journalists and independent media outlets.

“RSF sees a worrying decline in support and respect for media autonomy and an increase in pressure from the state or other political actors,” said Anne Bocandé, RSF editorial director. “States and other political forces are
10 playing a decreasing role in protecting press freedom. This disempowerment sometimes goes hand in hand with more hostile actions that undermine the role of journalists, or even instrumentalise the media through campaigns of harassment or disinformation.”

The Maghreb and Middle East regions performed the worst in terms of restrictions on press freedom by government forces, according to the report. In the past year, said RSF, governments across the region have
15 attempted to control and curtail the media through violence, arrests and draconian laws, compounded by “systematic impunity for crimes of violence against journalists”.

The RSF says that, since October 2023, more than 100 Palestinian reporters have been killed in Gaza, including at least 22 in the course of their work.

Elsewhere in the region, journalists have been killed in Sudan, where there have been serious attempts to curb
20 independent reporting of violence and civil war. The situation for media professionals in Syria has also deteriorated, with journalists who have fled press repression in their home country threatened with expulsion from neighbouring Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. The RSF also says that four of the world's biggest jailers of journalists—Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran—have continued to attack and detain them.

The RSF says that Latin America is also showing alarming indicators of political repression of journalism. In
25 Argentina, the new president, Javier Milei, has boasted about his assault on the free press and has shut down the country's biggest news agency. Press freedom is also under sustained political attack in Peru and El Salvador.

The US has performed badly due to increasing attacks on journalists from political officials, including public calls to imprison reporters.

Elections in sub-Saharan Africa saw violence against journalists fuelled by political attacks on media
30 freedom. In Nigeria nearly 20 reporters were attacked in early 2023, and in Madagascar, reporters were targeted while covering pre-election protests. More recently, Burkino Faso has suspended dozens of foreign news organisations, including the *Guardian*, over reporting of an alleged massacre of hundreds of civilians by the Burkinabe army.

In Europe, the index showed Russia dropping down the ranks of countries mounting attacks on press freedom
35 for what the RSF terms its “crusade” against independent journalism. More than 1,500 Russian journalists have fled abroad since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Belarus's position near the bottom of the RSF's index is due to the persistent persecution of journalists under the pretext of combating “extremism”.

Last week, a report by the German-based Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) warned that press
40 freedom is “perilously close to breaking point” in several European countries.

Repression of the free press also worsened in the Asia-Pacific region. The RSF says that the region's dictatorial governments have been tightening their hold over news and information with “increasing vigour” in countries such as Afghanistan, where the Taliban have all but destroyed independent journalism, and North Korea and China's “all-out persecution” of local media. Vietnam and Myanmar also fell in the rankings this
45 year due to their pursuit of mass imprisonment of media professionals.

The RSF also painted a bleak picture of the increasing use of artificial intelligence, calling its use in the arsenal of disinformation for political purposes “disturbing”, with deepfakes being used to influence the course of elections.

Reporting on the war against nature is also proving increasingly dangerous. Forty-four journalists have been
50 killed for covering environment stories over the past 15 years, according to a separate report by Unesco, which organises today's World Press Freedom Day.