

2011 Predators

AFRICA

Gambia - **Yahya Jammeh, President**

A self-proclaimed healer who says he has found cures to AIDS, obesity and erectile dysfunction, Yahya Jammeh has all the qualities of an unpredictable, violent and deranged dictator. He has vowed to cut off the heads of all homosexuals in order to clean up Gambian society. And he has declared himself ready to kill anyone trying to destabilise the country, above all human rights activists and other trouble-makers. "If you are affiliated with any human rights group, rest assured that your security and personal safety would not be guaranteed by my government," he threatened in a September 2009 televised address. "We are ready to kill saboteurs." No one takes his threats lightly.

The unsolved murder of Deyda Hydera, AFP correspondent and editor of the tri-weekly The Point, who was shot dead on a street in 2004, continues to fuel tension between the regime and the independent media. Jammeh insisted yet again in March 2011 that he was not involved in Hydera's death and but at the same time he warned that he would not "sacrifice the interests, the peace and stability and well-being of the Gambian people at the altar of freedom of expression."

The Gambia Press Union dared to address an open letter to the president in 2009 urging him to recognise the government's involvement in this murder. The response? Six journalists got two-year jail sentences on defamation and sedition charges. And were pardoned after a month in prison, because Jammeh is sometimes capable of leniency. He usually does not bother with charges when locking up journalists. Chief Ebrima Manneh, a reporter for the Daily Observer, was arrested without charge in 2006 and then disappeared. He probably died in prison in 2008.

Eritrea - **Issaias Afeworki, President**

Freed from Ethiopian domination in 1991 and enslaved again in 2001 by Issaias Afeworki's authoritarian lunacy, Eritrea has the distinction of being Africa's youngest republic (until South Sudan's creation) and at the same governed by its most ruthless dictator. A former rebel chief and hero of Eritrea's war of liberation, he makes no bones about his totalitarian tendencies. He believes a price must be paid for Eritrea's independence. Basic freedoms were officially "suspended" ten years ago after ruling party dissidents started pressing for more democracy. Any hint of opposition is seen as a threat to "national security." The privately-owned media no longer exist. There are just state media whose content is worthy of the Soviet era.

Ruled with an iron hand by a small ultra-nationalist clique centred on Afeworki, this Red Sea country has been transformed in just a few years into a vast open prison, Africa's biggest jail for the media. Around 30 journalists are currently being held in prisons, undergrounds cells or metal containers. Four of them have died as a result of the extremely cruel conditions or committed suicide. Others have just disappeared. And others flee the country illegally, at risk to their lives. But when President Afeworki is asked about the imprisoned journalists, as he was by Al-Jazeera in May 2008, he replies: "There were never any. There aren't any. You have been misinformed."

Equatorial Guinea - **Teodoro Obiang Nguema , President**

The years pass but nothing changes in the "Kuwait of Africa," the fiefdom of a leader described by the national radio station as the "God of Equatorial Guinea." President Obiang Nguema was reelected at the end of 2009 with 96.7 per cent of the votes in polling that many international media including the Spanish daily El País were prevented from covering. The president maintains absolute control over this small oil state in the Gulf of Guinea.

The privately-owned press is limited to a few small newspapers. The country has no journalists' union or press freedom organization. The stranglehold which the president and his family maintain over the economy is accompanied by an overwhelming personality cult. The international media have just one correspondent in the capital, who is closely watched. The authorities nonetheless continue to insist that the lack of media pluralism is due to poverty and that the high percentages the president gets in every election are "the result of acceptance of his policies." The national radio and TV broadcaster RTVGE has not been allowed to mention the unrest and revolutions that have been shaking the Arab world since the start of 2011. The official pretext is that, as African Union president since January 2011, Obiang Nguema has an overriding obligation to respect neutrality.

Rwanda - **Paul Kagame, President**

Thanks to a thin face, slight build, intellectual's glasses and conservative suits, Paul Kagame looks more like a modern, Internet-savvy politician than a former guerrilla chief and war lord, who seized power in the wake of the 1994 genocide has since used a reconciliation process to bolster his authority and neutralize the opposition. President since 2000 and reelected in 2010, Kagame does not tolerate embarrassing questions at news conferences, often denigrates journalists and brands outspoken media as "Radio Mille Collines." Every year several Rwandan journalists decide to go into exile because they find the atmosphere unbearable in their home country. This does not worry President Kagame, who refers to these journalists as "mercenaries" and "bums."

Two women journalists were given sentences of 7 and 17 years in prison in early 2011 for criticizing the president. Umuvugizi deputy editor Jean-Léonard Rugabage was murdered in Kigali in June 2010, probably for investigating the intelligence

services and, in particular, their attempt to murder an exiled general. Umuvugizi and another newspaper, Umuseso, have long been two of the regime's biggest bugbears.

Defamation, invasion of privacy and insulting the president are the charges preferred by the information ministry and the High Media Council, its (not very independent) regulatory authority. To cap it all, anyone thinking of launching a new newspaper, radio station or TV station is now required to show an exorbitant amount of start-up capital (41,000 euros for a newspaper, for example) in order to obtain a permit. It is a good way of discouraging media diversity.

Somalia - **Islamist militias (Al-Shabaab, Hizb-Al-Islam)**

There is no sign of any respite for Somalia after 20 years of war. Islamist insurgents, previously united against Ethiopia's troops and now embroiled in internal rivalry and conflicts, have contributed to the chaos since 2009 by waging a war of harassment against the fragile transitional government. The bearers of a strict version of Islam, they ban cinema, video games and radio music. Al-Shabaab (The Youth) has emerged as the biggest and best organized of these groups. It wages a campaign of terror and targeted murders against leading members of Somali civil society who are, it says, guilty of serving the interests of the "Crusaders" of the West. Dozens of teachers, academics and politicians have been killed.

The victims include journalists, who are regarded almost by definition as enemies. Twelve of them have been killed since 2009, either caught in crossfire or directly targeted by the various militia factions. Radio Shabelle has paid a particularly heavy price, losing its manager, Mukhtar Mohamed Hirabe, and three of its reporters in the space of a few months. Other Radio Shabelle employees fled the country. Al-Shabaab and Hizb-Al-Islam now control a large part of the country, have their own prisons, carry out arrests and execute sentences. They also issue directives to journalists about how to cover the news and, in 2010, seized control of about 10 radio stations, which now broadcast their political and religious propaganda.

Swaziland - **Mswati III, King**

With an HIV/AIDS prevalence of about 40 per cent, a soaring poverty rate and no viable economy, foreign investors have thrown in the sponge. Swaziland is self-destructing and if there is single person to blame it is clearly King Mswati III. Lacking vision and management abilities, this absolute monarch abuses his royal powers. No rivals are tolerated. Political parties are banned, and what would good they be in a country that has never had democratic elections?

The state-owned media only carry reports that have been checked and approved by the information minister. Independent journalists find it extremely hard to get access to official information. Self-censorship is standard practice and criticising the king is inconceivable. The authorities often remind journalists how to behave, warning those who criticize the government that they could find themselves "accused of supporting terrorism and arrested." The government forced two journalists, Mfomfo Nkambule of the Times of Swaziland (the only privately-owned newspaper) and Mario Masuku of

the Times Sunday, to stop writing their columns in 2009. Several journalists were briefly detained in April 2011 while covering demonstrations calling for the king's removal.

Zimbabwe - **Robert Mugabe, President**

It is thanks to its president that Zimbabwe's privately-owned print media are constantly harassed and that the state-owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) has a monopoly of radio and TV broadcasting. Robert Mugabe blocks everything, prevents the national unity government from functioning properly, makes sure the independent media are unable to express themselves freely and, with the help of his closest aides, keeps the state media under tight control.

Mugabe stepped up the pressure on the media after his government's electoral setbacks in 2008. Editors were placed under electronic surveillance to check their loyalty to the party, while opposition activists were abducted and tried for "terrorist plots" in grotesque trials.

Despite being hailed as a "liberator" when he came to power in the 1980s, Mugabe has no problem with the arbitrary arrests and harassment to which most of the country's journalists are exposed. In 2002, he was the architect of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the sole aim of which was to finish off the privately-owned press, above all The Daily News, then the country's most widely-read daily. In 2011, "the old man" was preparing for the next elections – for which a date has yet to be set – by continuing to curtail free speech.

AMERICAS

Colombia - **"Black Eagles," Paramilitary group**

The extreme right-wing militias called the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), which were created to help the army fight the extreme left-wing guerrillas, are far from being disarmed. According to official figures, a major programme for dismantling the AUC from 2003 to 2006 resulted in the demobilisation of 30,000 of its fighters in exchange for a broad amnesty. Most of them have turned to contract killing and drug trafficking, but between 5,000 and 8,000 reportedly regrouped in about 20 bands that resumed paramilitary activities in 12 departments.

The most feared of these armed groups, the "Black Eagles," continues to impose a reign of terror, killing journalists or forcing them to censor themselves or flee the country. This armed group has been responsible for many cases of intimidation and violence against the press in the Caribbean coastal region since late 2006. The danger it poses has since extended throughout the country and its targets include journalists who criticize the so-called "democratic security" policies launched by President Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and still in force.

Honduras - **Miguel Facussé Barjum, businessmen and landowner**

An uncle of former President Carlos Flores Facussé (1998-2002), agro-industrialist Miguel Facussé Barjum is a member of one of the powerful oligarchic families that control Honduras' wealth. He heads Dinant, a company specializing in producing and marketing palm oil, and was one of the leading supporters of the June 2009 coup that toppled President Manuel Zelaya and paved the way for a still-continuing crackdown on opposition and grass-roots media. Its targets include small radio stations that defend the interests of local communities and often challenge those of big landowners such as Facussé.

A community radio station launched on 14 April 2010 in a fertile region coveted by the "oil palm magnate," La Voz de Zacate Grande has been the constant target of physical attacks, censorship and persecution by private security guards in Facussé's pay, with the police and army acting as accomplices. The same goes for the Afro-Honduran Radio Coco Dulce, a community radio station on the Atlantic coast. Ten journalists were murdered in Honduras in 2010. A probable or proven link to the victim's work as a journalist exists in three of the ten cases. All are still unpunished.

Mexico - **Sinaloa, Gulf and Juárez cartels**

Half a dozen cartels have fought each other relentlessly since the late 1990s for control of drug trafficking in the areas bordering the United States. The traffickers do not hesitate to bribe politicians in order to impose their law. Their presence is far from being limited to the coastal and border states, and the situation got much worse when a federal offensive was launched against the cartels immediately after President Felipe Calderón's installation in December 2006. The police and army have also played a major role in violations of human rights and free expression. Seventy-one journalists have been murdered since 2000 and 10 others have disappeared since 2003. More than half of them had been covering stories linked to drug trafficking. None of the instigators of these murders and disappearances has ever been arrested or tried. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for the media in the western hemisphere.

Cuba - **Raúl Castro, President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers**

Fidel Castro passed the reins of power to his younger brother Raúl, the defence minister, five days after falling ill on 26 July 2006 and undergoing a major operation. Formally confirmed as President of the Council of State on 24 February 2008, Raúl has behaved little better than his brother as regards human rights, and the harassment of independent journalists and bloggers has never stopped. It includes police brutality, summonses and searches by State Security (the political police) and detention for short periods.

The page has nonetheless been turned on the "Black Spring" crackdown of March 2003. From July 2010 to March 2011, the regime freed a total of 52 dissidents jailed during the crackdown, a third of who had been running or working for small independent news agencies. Most of them had to agree to forced exile (in most cases

in Spain) in exchange for their release. Long one of the world's biggest prisons for journalists, Cuba ceased to have any journalists in detention in April 2011 when it released Albert Santiago Du Bouchet on condition that he take a one-way ticket to Spain. He had been held for two years.

ASIA

Philippines - Private militias

More than 50 people, including 32 journalists, were killed by militiamen working for the Ampatuan family on 23 November 2009 in Maguindanao province, on the southern island of Mindanao. It was the biggest massacre in the history of journalism and shocked public opinion, but it changed little in the Philippines. Militiamen and hit-men can take out journalists at any time with impunity. Militiamen have been implicated in most of the hundred or so murders of journalists since democracy was restored in 1986. Thugs employed by corrupt politicians or contract killers hired for a few thousand dollars, they usually target a local radio presenter who upset the people they are working for. The same modus operandi is nearly always used: the journalist is gunned down by two masked men on a motorcycle, often in broad daylight and with people looking on.

Aside from a few isolated attempts to render justice, for example, in the fatal shooting of Radio Mindanao Network commentator Gerardo Ortega on 24 January 2011, the culture of impunity prevails. A Manila court acquitted radio host Roger Mariano's presumed killers in August 2010. The way the Maguindanao massacre trial is proceeding suggests that no improvement is in sight, despite the justice minister's recent announcement of a new body to bolster efforts to combat violence against the media. The formation of ad hoc special units has so far has little impact on violence by private militias, who have turned the Philippines, and especially the island of Mindanao, into one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists.

Burma - Thein Sein, President

Burma's parliament elected Thein Sein as the country's eighth president on 4 February 2011. The same day, a Rangoon court sentenced Maung Maung Zeya, a journalist working for Democratic Voice of Burma, an independent exile radio and TV station, to a total of 13 years in prison for violating the Unlawful Association Act, Immigration Act and Electronics Act. Two days before that, Kaung Myat Hlaing, a blogger also known as "Nat Soe," received a 10-year jail term under the Electronics Act.

In his inaugural address on 30 March, Thein Sein tried to present the new government in a positive light. "We must also respect the role of the media as a fourth estate," he said. Fine words. But despite a few releases designed to give the military-backed government a more flexible image, journalists remain under permanent surveillance. Those suspected of sending video footage or reports about the disastrous situation to media outside the country are always hunted down by the president's

thugs. Three journalists who were given long jail sentences at a trial in November 2008 – Zarganar, Zaw Thet Htwe and Thant Zin Aung – are still in prison. A decision to exempt sports and entertainment publications from prior censorship by the notorious Press Scrutiny Board is just window dressing.

The 65-year-old Thein Sein oversees a cabinet whose 30 members are mostly former army officers and has inherited the “directed democracy” system created by his predecessor, Gen Than Shwe, the head of the now officially-dissolved military junta. Than Shwe does not intend to retire from political life and now heads a “State Supreme Council,” which is able to act without referring to parliament.

Sri Lanka - **Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Defence Secretary**

The president’s younger brother and defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse is openly hostile to the media and has not stopped targeting Sri Lankan and foreign journalists although the civil war ended in May 2009. When asked about cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda’s disappearance in January 2010, he brushed aside the problem: “Eknaligoda had himself disappeared (...) We don’t even know who this Eknaligoda is, what he had done.” He also made insulting comments about the Sunday Leader’s well-known editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, when he was murdered a year earlier. After the defeat of the Tamil rebels, the president and his brother rounded on their new enemy, Gen. Sarath Fonseka, the opposition candidate in the January 2010 elections, and had him jailed. Ruwan Weerakoon, a journalist who supported Fonseka, was also jailed.

Media that criticize the president and his brother are subject to reprisals. The online newspaper LankaeNews and its journalists had been threatened and attacked for more than a year until a deliberately-started fire destroyed its premises on the night of 30 January 2011. Egged on by Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the government press berates and often defames civil society groups. Dozens of state media employees were fired, suspended or threatened for protesting against government control of their editorial policies. The defence minister publicly regretted the abolition of prison sentences for press offences and, to address this “mistake,” pressured for the restoration of the Press Council, which also had the power to impose jail sentences on journalists. By allowing impunity to prevail in murders and kidnappings of journalists, he has created a climate of danger that badly hobbles the media’s work.

North Korea - **Kim Jong-il, Supreme Leader**

The tyrant of Pyongyang has appeared less often in public since suffering a stroke in 2008 and is grooming his younger son, Kim Jong-un, to succeed him. In September 2010, Kim Jong-un was named successively as a member of the National Defence Commission, a four-star general and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission. Kim Jong-il and his family continue to maintain North Koreans in a terrifying isolation. The totalitarian regime he has headed since the death in 1994 of his father, Kim Il-sung (known as the “Eternal President” and “Humanity’s Eternal Sun”), has of late been waging a campaign against “illegal” use of the few mobile phones.

In a way that is unique in the world, the North Korean media are used primarily for a personality cult of Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung, who are praised as “socialist heroes,” and the cult will almost certainly soon be extended to Kim Jong-un. The “Dear Leader” banned the media from discussing the famine that killed millions of North Koreans during the 1990s. Each day his activities, or those of his father or children, begin the TV news broadcasts and are front-page stories in the newspapers. The misspelling of his name suffices to send the culprit to one of North Korea’s ideological re-education camps.

In 2008, Kim Jong-il ordered the security forces to prevent foreign videos, magazines, telephones, computers and CDs from entering the country from China. Several people have been executed for using mobile phones without permission. Others have been sent to the concentration camps where at least 150,000 people are held in terrible conditions, in some cases just for listening to a radio station based abroad. One of these camps is thought to hold the military officer who managed to send a video of a public execution to Japan in 2006.

Kim Jong-il has another obsession: the international and exile radio stations that broadcast programmes targeted at the North Korean population. The Pyongyang media are told to keep threatening these stations while the police try to track down those who surreptitiously listen to them. Radio sets are very closely regulated. North Koreans must have a special permit to own radio sets, which can only be tuned to the official stations. Independent exile radio stations based in South Korea, such as Radio Free Chosun, Open Radio North Korea and Radio Free North Korea, nonetheless manage to break through the barrier of censorship.

Afghanistan, Pakistan - **Mullah Mohammad Omar, Taliban chief**

Mullah Omar, who likes to call himself “Commander of the Believers” and “Servant of Islam,” has led the Afghan Taliban since 1994. Nowadays he also has a lot of support in Pakistan, where he heads the Taliban ruling council, the Rahbari Shura, which consists of himself and 10 other Talebs. Cloaking himself in mystery and refusing to be photographed or filmed, Mullah Omar is nonetheless aware of the importance of the media war. His spokesmen try to be quoted in the media as much as possible and his thugs threaten local reporters who do not relay his propaganda.

The Taliban, who control many areas of Afghanistan, often kidnap journalists for ransom or for prisoner swaps. Two French journalists working for France 3, Hervé Ghesquière and Stéphane Taponier, have been Taliban hostages since 29 December 2009. The threats to journalists reinforce the Taliban’s sway over the population and create news black holes in the south and east of Afghanistan and in western Pakistan.

When he ruled the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, Mullah Omar successively banned music, television, the Internet and all form of criticism. The only radio broadcaster just carried religious programmes. The undisputed chief of the “students of theology,” he swore by the strict application of the Sharia alone. Nowadays he supports the terror policies of his allies in the Movement of the Taliban

in Pakistan (TTP), which have resulted in countless deaths. Suicide bombing is the method most commonly used to spread terror.

Vietnam - Nguyen Phu Trong, Communist Party general secretary

The Vietnamese Communist Party congress that was held from 10 to 19 January 2011 ended with Nguyen Phu Trong being elected as the party's new general secretary. This former head of the conservative faction has spent his entire career in the state apparatus including, from 1967 to 1996, spells as an editor and then editor in chief of Tap chi Cong San, the Communist Party's theoretical organ, which helps to develop the party's ideology.

Although Trong has not yet achieved the distinction of his predecessor, who had more than 100 years in jail terms given out to bloggers, dissident writers and critics in the space of just a few months, his first few months in office have been promising. His score card includes a seven-year jail sentence for the dissident Cu Huy Ha Vu on 4 April 2011 on a charge of anti-state propaganda, just for defending a multi-party system in comments posted online and in foreign media.

At total of 18 netizens are currently detained in Vietnam just for calling for democracy and a multiparty system. Nguyen Dan Que, a 69-year-old independent journalist is facing the possibility of imprisonment for calling for demonstrations inspired by the Middle East's pro-democracy movements. Nguyen Van Ly, a Catholic priest and human rights activist, could be sent back to prison because of his activities as an online journalist. Trong has the power to bypass the prime minister and president and impose censorship and arrests, defying the international community's recommendations.

China - Hu Jintao, President

President of the People's Republic and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu Jintao fears that the Arab revolutionary virus could spread to China and is making more use than ever of the security forces, cyber-police and Propaganda Department to censor calls for democracy inspired by the "Jasmine Revolution." Even if he publicly professes support for media freedom, this conservative communist often restricts the freedom of the liberal press and dissidents. He gave orders, for example, for those who signed the pro-democracy Charter 08 to be hunted down. An 11-year jail sentence was imposed on its main architect, the intellectual Liu Xiaobo, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2010, and more than 100 signatories have been harassed. Thirteen netizens, including the human rights activist Liu Xianbin and the artist Ai Weiwei, are currently detained.

Tibet can only be accessed by the foreign press with a special permit, which is very hard to get. The president sent the toughest elements of the Communist Party there to suppress the unrest that erupted in March 2008. Since then, more than 50 Tibetans have been arrested for circulating photos, video or reports about the situation in the province. Hu Jintao also ordered a ruthless crackdown on the Uyghurs who revolted in

Xinjiang in July 2009. The Internet was disconnected for several months and was never fully restored.

Hu Jintao's determination to control the media cost the lives of infants who fell ill after consuming baby formula that was contaminated with melamine because, ahead of the Olympics, the authorities banned the media from cover such stories. And he continues to refuse to release the "Olympic prisoners" – dissidents such as Hu Jia who were arrested in 2008 for demanding more democracy and who are still being held in appalling conditions. The censorship and repression ordered by Hu Jintao reached unprecedented levels in 2011.

Laos - **Choummaly Sayasone, President**

A former defence minister who has been president since 2006 and who was reelected as head of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party in March 2011, Choummaly Sayasone continues to block the emergence of privately-owned media. He can count on the loyalty of those who run the state media, including the ruling party mouthpiece, the newspaper Paxaxon (People), which defines itself as "a revolutionary publication produced by and for the people." The activities of the president and top party leaders are always the lead stories in the state media, which are the only media permitted in Laos.

The president has issued orders that, when referring to him, journalists should only use reports put out by the official news agency, Khaosan Pathet Lao (The News of Laos). The authorities do not, however, censor the Internet. When thousands of members of the Hmong minority were forcibly repatriated from Thailand, the security forces prevented several foreign journalists from visiting the "camps" that were set up to receive them. The president has refused to pardon two Hmongs who have been in prison since 2003 for working as guides for two European reporters.

EUROPE

Russia - **Ramzan Kadyrov, President of the Republic of Chechnya**

Often referred to as "Putin's guard dog," Ramzan Kadyrov shares the Russian prime minister's taste for crude language and strong action. President and undisputed chief of this Russian republic in the North Caucasus since April 2007, he has restored a semblance of calm after the devastation of two wars. A high price has been paid for this superficial stability, the introduction of a lawless regime. Kadyrov's private militias, which even carry out armed actions in neighbouring republics, are not the only ones to take advantage of this situation.

Anyone questioning the policies of this "Hero of Russia" (an award he received from Putin in 2004) is exposed to deadly reprisals. Two fierce critics of the handling of the "Chechen issue," reporter Anna Politkovskaya and human rights activist Natalia Estemirova, were both gunned down – Politkovskaya in Moscow in October 2006 and Estemirova in Chechnya in July 2009. When human rights activists blamed him for their deaths, Kadyrov was dismissive: "That's bullshit, that's just gossip," he said. A

criminal prosecution was nonetheless brought against Oleg Orlov, the head of the Russian human rights NGO Memorial, for repeating the allegations.

The Chechen media toe the line. Kadyrov said this about terrorism: "My method is simple. Those who disrupt the people's peace must be dealt with harshly, cruelly even." And on the press, he added: "The press must be in the service of the Chechen people's unity." In practice, journalists interpret this as meaning they must praise his every action and the people's devotion to him.

To ensure absolute loyalty, Kadyrov uses not only fear but also money. New newspapers have been created with Chechen government funding to create the impression that the republic's media are flourishing and vibrant. But they all just repeat the same refrain ad infinitum. As for foreign journalists, they are accused of distorting Chechen reality. Kadyrov has a few friends he can count on. They include the only foreign head of state to congratulate him when he was sworn in for a second five-year term as president on 5 April 2011 – Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko.

Russia - **Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister**

Vladimir Putin, who was president from 2000 to 2008 and has been prime minister for the past three years, continues to make his influence felt in the Kremlin. Tough leadership from the top in all areas of society is his watchword for rebuilding a strong state after years of confusion and diluted authority under Boris Yeltsin. The press has not been spared. "Control" is the key word for this former KGB officer – control of the state, of economic and political forces, of geopolitical interests and the media. National TV stations now speak with a single voice.

Independent journalists and human rights activists are exposed to considerable danger, especially in the North Caucasus. Brutal physical attacks on journalists, including Mikhail Beketov in November 2008 and Oleg Kashin in November 2010, have risen in recent years. Five were murdered in 2009 and 25 since Putin came to power in 2000. President Dmitry Medvedev has recognised the existence of political murders for the first time but impunity is still the norm. The Nashi (Ours), a nationalist youth movement created in 2005 at the behest of Putin and others who lament Russia's imperial decline, sues newspapers critical of the Soviet era or the current government and also hunts people down. As well as manipulating groups and institutions, Putin has created an atmosphere of exaggerated national pride that encourages persecution of dissidents and freethinkers and a tradition of impunity that is steadily undermining the rule of law.

Turkmenistan - **Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, President**

In four years as president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has failed to show that more freedom of expression is a priority, despite his promises of reform to break with the weirder aspects of the legacy of his predecessor, President-for-Life Saparmurat Niyazov, whom he served as both health minister and personal dentist. He said in 2010 he favoured a multiparty system and privately-owned media, but the gap between words and deeds in one of the world's most brutal and absolute dictatorships is very wide. Despite opening up the economy and playing Russia and Western countries off against each other, state control of the country's five TV stations, 25 newspapers and 15 magazines is absolute and even Russian TV stations that can be picked up in Turkmenistan are censored before being relayed to local viewers. The number of journalists and human rights activists in prison or psychiatric hospitals is unknown.

Activity at a handful of recently-opened Internet cafés is very closely monitored and they only give access to a highly-censored version of the Web called Turkmenet. A monthly private broadband subscription is an absurd \$7,000 and the government restored its monopoly of the mobile phone network in December 2010. The army was called in to quell riots in front of the offices of mobile phone company Altyn Asyr protesting against a shortage of SIM cards. Turkmenistan continues to be one of the world's most repressive states and its population as isolated as ever.

Uzbekistan - **Islam Karimov, President**

After more than 20 years in power and despite promises of reform, Islam Karimov is still breaking his own records for repression and paranoia. "Reelected" in 2007 with 88 per cent of the vote, he has steadily boosted his power, ruthlessly silencing the opposition press through disappearances, forcible internment in psychiatric hospitals and arbitrary imprisonment. Journalists can pay dearly for their reporting, with charges of terrorism or extremism and trial on trumped-up charges. At least 11 journalists are currently in prison. Karimov said in 1999 he was "prepared to blow off the heads of 200 people, to sacrifice their lives, in order to preserve peace and tranquillity."

Karimov is everywhere in the state media, which credits him with all the country's "successes," and tolerates no reporting of the country's social and economic life. Economic under-development or the plight of women, for example, are incompatible with the modern image the regime wants to project. "Insulting the Uzbek people" was one of the charges in prosecutions in 2010 of photographer Umida Akhmedova and radio show host Khayrullo Khamidov for covering social problems. *Voice of America* correspondent Abdulmalik Boboyev was very heavily fined in October 2010 for the same supposed offence and also for "putting out material threatening law and order."

Fewer and fewer independent local journalists are working and it has been impossible for the foreign media to operate in Uzbekistan since the bloody repression of the 2005 uprising in Andijan. Since March 2011 Karimov has tried to ward off any local imitation of the Middle East revolts. Human Rights Watch has been expelled from the

country, state media journalists banned from talking to foreign diplomats without government **permission** and contacts with the outside world sharply reduced. Online censorship has been stepped up and mobile phone operators are required to report “suspicious content” and cut off Internet access whenever the government decides.

Azerbaijan - **Ilham Aliev, President**

Ilham Aliev was carefully prepared for the presidency of this oil-rich country (courted by many foreign governments) by his father, Heydar Aliev, its ruler since 1969. He headed the ruling party’s candidate list in the 1999 parliamentary elections and, after his father suffered a heart attack live on TV in April 2003, he was appointed prime minister and then elected president later that year. He was “reelected” with 89% of the vote in October 2008 and tightened his grip in 2009 with removal of limits on reelection. Initially seen as an amiable man unsuited to the harsh realities of politics, he proved himself a worthy heir of his father by cracking down on opponents and on newspapers that support the opposition or criticise the country’s widespread corruption.

A slight thaw in 2010, when nearly all imprisoned journalists and bloggers were freed, soon ended. The editor of the weekly *Realny Azerbaijan* and the daily *Gundelik Azerbaijan*, Eynulla Fatullayev, was detained for no good reason and in violation of European Court of Human Rights rulings, and repression sharply increased in early March 2011 as the regime appeared to panic in the face of the Middle East uprisings. Young bloggers and activists such as Bakhtiyar Khajiyev, who called for demonstrations through Facebook, were jailed. Protests still took place, notably on 11 March and 2 April, but were brutally put down and many journalists arrested and beaten as they tried to cover the unrest. Staff of the opposition paper *Azadlig* were kidnapped and released after being forced to promise not to criticise the regime. Online activity became more difficult, with independent news sites hacked into, connections very difficult in regions such as Nakhichevan and several Internet service providers ordered to block access to Facebook.

Belarus - **Alexander Lukashenko, President**

Alexander Lukashenko’s already-grim record since coming to power in 1994 worsened with harsh repression of protests after his “reelection” on 19 December 2010, when a score of journalists reporting on it were arrested and beaten by police. House searches, arrests and trials in Minsk and elsewhere have increased. Natalia Radzina, editor of the opposition website *Charter97.org*, was forced to flee abroad. Irina Khalip, correspondent of the independent Russian paper *Novaya Gazeta*, was released from prison in late January 2011 but kept under house arrest. Both journalists, along with all the losing election candidates and about 60 prominent activists, are being prosecuted for taking part in the demonstrations. At least two journalists – Yauhen Vaskovich and Andrei Pachobut – are still in prison. The regime has used an array of Kafka-esque tactics against Pachobut, who is correspondent of the Polish paper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, including cancelling his accreditation and forbidding him from leaving the country, and he now faces a four-year jail sentence for “insulting” Lukashenko.

The surprising areas of freedom that have remained over the past 20 years have now been sharply reduced. The state monopoly of all printing and distribution networks allows for instant crackdown on journalists who try to rock the boat. Selective granting of accreditation forces many foreign media outlets and their local correspondents to work illegally, making them even more vulnerable. More than ever, the only option is to go underground, returning to Soviet-era “samizdats” (forbidden material copied and distributed clandestinely). The Internet does not make up for this, as cybercafé users and shared-line phone subscribers have since last year been identified and monitored, and website content subject to prior approval and monitoring by an “analysis centre” directly attached to the president’s office. All this in a country bordering the European Union.

Kazakhstan - **Nursultan Nazarbayev, President**

Nursultan Nazarbayev was reelected on 3 April 2011 with an announced 95% of the vote, indicating the plight of the opposition, independent media and critics of the regime. The country became the first former Soviet republic to annually chair the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010 but Nazarbayev did nothing to change his image as a predator of press freedom. He decreed prison sentences for anyone attacking his “honour” and “dignity” and tightened rules for officially registering media outlets. Newspapers can be legally shut down more easily and journalists who work for a suspended publication can be banned from working for three years.

The Internet is no longer spared. A 2009 law gave blogs, chat-rooms and other websites the same legal status as the traditional print media, thus making them liable to stand trial for press offences, which are punishable by imprisonment. Prosecution and physical attacks on journalists are common. Journalist Igor Lara was beaten up for writing about a 19-day strike by 10,000 oil-workers in the southwestern town of Zhanaozen and about other oil industry problems. Ramazan Yesergepov, founder and editor of the weekly *Alma-Ata-Info*, remains in prison. Power struggles inside the regime continue to take their toll on the media. The country’s most popular blog platform, for example, was closed in 2008 after the president’s disgraced former son-in-law used it to launch his own online newspaper.

Italy - **Organised crime**

Italian shopkeepers, business-people and judges are not the only victims of organised crime networks such as Cosa Nostra, the Camorra, the 'Ndrangheta, and the Sacra Corona Unita. Journalists and writers also find themselves in the line of fire as soon as they try to report on the Italian mafia. One of them, Roberto Saviano, author of the book *Gomorra*, is forced to live under permanent police protection.

A dozen journalists work with police protection. There have been hundreds of threats, anonymous letters, slashed tyres and burned cars. Every journalist writing about these criminal groups has been watched at one time or another. Lirio Abbate, correspondent in Palermo for the news agency Ansa and author of *I Complici* (The Accomplices), also lives under permanent police protection, as does (since March 2008) Rosaria Capacchione, who has covered the Camorra for the main Naples daily *Il Mattino* for more than 20 years. She and Saviano are both hunted by the Casalesi clan. Their risky work gets no support from Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who said in November 2009 he would like to “strangle” writers and filmmakers who give Italy a bad image by focusing on the mafia.

Spain – **ETA** **Terrorist organisation**

Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom), the Basque armed separatist group better known by the acronym ETA, has constantly targeted journalists in France and Spain since it was founded in 1959. Its victims include José María Portell, murdered in 1978, José Javier Uranga, wounded in a shooting in 1980, José Luis Lopez de la Calle, murdered in 2000, and Gorka Landaburu, who suffered severe face and hand injuries when he opened a parcel-bomb in 2001. Several dozen Spanish journalists are still forced to have bodyguards because of ETA death threats.

ETA exploded a car-bomb outside the Bilbao headquarters of the Basque public TV station EITB on 31 December 2008, causing considerable damage but no injuries. Three weeks later ETA accused journalists of distorting the facts with the support of “political commissars and editors” and accused EITB of practising “political apartheid” and “taking orders from Spain.” In a barely veiled threat, it added: “We are not going to tell journalists how to do their work. We are making a clear appeal to those in charge of EITB to work in a responsible way.”

MIDDLE EAST

Saudi Arabia – **King Abdallah Ibn Al-Saud**

The country’s sixth king, Abdallah ibn Abdulaziz Al-Saud, came to the throne in August 2005 and his regime has alternated between repression and openness. Political activists and journalists have been arrested but the country’s first local elections have been held. The royal family’s hold on the state and the supremacy of its Wahabi ideology is based on total control of news. No laws protect freedom of expression so journalists dare not criticise the regime and self-censorship is the rule. Stability-threatening regional unrest and the fight against terrorism continue to be used to justify curbing basic freedoms. Visiting foreign journalists are always accompanied by government officials who report back on what they do.

Since the start of the Middle East uprisings, including demonstrations in neighbouring Bahrain, the government has been very careful not to allow such protests to develop in Saudi Arabia. Access to Saudi websites that sprung up during the Tunisian and

Egyptian revolutions calling for reforms (<http://dawlaty.info/> and <http://www.saudireform.com/>) were blocked, along with a Facebook page, "Revolutionary Nostalgia," which also urges reform. Foreign journalists were also banned from covering protests in the eastern part of the country and a BBC crew was stopped in March from reporting on unrest in Hofuf. The Reuters correspondent had his accreditation withdrawn on 15 March after he filed a report on a protest that the regime considered inaccurate. Saudi Arabia is one of the world's most repressive countries towards the Internet. New restrictions came into force on 1 January 2011, adding to laws passed in 2007. More than 400,000 websites are currently blocked. Far from trying to hide what they are doing, the Saudi authorities defend their censorship as being necessary to maintain social order.

Bahrain – King Hamad Ben Aissa Al Khalifa

Since the start of the country's pro-democracy movement, the government has tried to control news about the protests and the excesses of police and troops. Foreign journalists have been arrested and deported, others have been unable to get entry visas and Bahrainis wanting to tell them what is happening have been threatened. Free-speech activists have been hounded and prosecuted, photographers, bloggers and netizens arrested (one of them dying in prison), journalists forced to resign from the main opposition paper and called before the state prosecutor, and printing any news about ongoing investigations by the military prosecutor banned for supposed national security reasons. The media blackout has been accompanied by a big regime propaganda campaign, through media it controls, against major protest leaders, who are dubbed traitors or terrorists. Hamad Ben Aissa Al Khalifa, as king of Bahrain, is responsible for all this violence and abuses.

Iran - Ali Khamenei Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has ruled Iran since the death of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1989. He has been consolidating his predecessor's ultra-conservative policies for more than 20 years and controls all the country's political and judicial institutions.

As Supreme Leader, he is responsible for the continuing crackdown on journalists and others since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection on 12 June 2009. His virulent and inflammatory criticism of media with international links has fuelled the rage of government bodies carrying out the repression. He explicitly agreed to the judicial system staging show trials of journalists in August 2009 and January 2010 and giving journalists and bloggers heavy prison terms and sometimes death sentences. The Revolutionary Guards, commanded by Khamenei, control Teheran's Evin prison so he is directly responsible for the torture and other abuses of journalists and bloggers jailed there. Many are held in sections 209 and 240 without being officially registered and in flagrant violation of international law. Reporters Without Borders accuses Khamenei of crimes against humanity.

Iran - Mahmoud Ahmadinejad President

Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection on 12 June 2009, the opposition has been mercilessly and violently repressed. Many journalists have alternated in the past year and a half between arbitrary detention and being under surveillance, forcing many to flee abroad for fear the next arrest could mean longer imprisonment. More than 200 journalists and bloggers have been arrested, 40 are still in prison and 100 or so have left the country, the biggest exodus since the 1979 revolution. Ahmadinejad is directly responsible for this crackdown, which he organises with the ministries of intelligence, culture and Islamic guidance and the Revolutionary Guards. He also closely supervises the list of journalists to be arbitrarily arrested. A score of media outlets have been shut down by the culture ministry's censorship arm, the Press Authorisation and Surveillance Commission. The government hounds journalists and their families, makes summary arrests and uses secret imprisonment to silence its critics.

The state monopoly of broadcast media continues, private ownership of satellite dishes forbidden and the government does all it can to stop foreign radio and TV broadcasts in Persian being picked up in Iran. Foreign media are closely watched and their local correspondents risk losing their accreditation at any time. Many foreign journalists were unable to get their visas extended in 2011 and had to leave the country. International organisations very rarely get permission to visit Iran.

Israel – Israeli Defence Forces

IDF soldiers were again responsible for abuses of authority and acts of violence against local journalists in the Palestinian Territories in 2010 and Reporters Without Borders registered more than 50 cases. In addition, the 60 or so foreign journalists aboard the humanitarian flotilla heading for the Gaza Strip on 31 May 2010 told how IDF soldiers who arrested, detained and expelled them seized all their equipment, documents and personal belongings. None of it has been returned so the soldiers can be considered guilty of theft, and many journalists have filed complaints. Israeli soldiers are rarely punished for their abuses.

Libya - Muammar Gaddafi Head of state, Guide of the Revolution

Before the 2011 uprising in eastern Libya, nearly all the country's media outlets were state-controlled or tied to Muammar Gaddafi. Small signs of opening-up appeared in 2007 and 2008, when privately-owned media outlets were allowed (controlled by Al-Ghad, a company owned by Gaddafi's son Seif al-Islam) and three foreign news agencies were permitted to open offices in Tripoli. But in 2010, Al-Ghad was nationalised and opposition websites began to be censored.

Since the uprising in February 2011, attacks on journalists by the government and Gaddafi

loyalists have increased. The “Guide of the Revolution” has expressed his hatred of foreign media (“stray dogs”) and accused them of causing chaos. His regime said it would treat journalists who entered the country illegally as Al-Qaeda agents and warned they could be arrested at any time. Gaddafi loyalists arrested more than 20 foreign journalists entering the country from Tunisia and Egypt, legally or not, and at least six Libyan journalists are thought to have been arrested since the uprising started. Besides, four journalists have been killed. Foreign journalists invited to Libya by Gaddafi have not been allowed to work freely, have been forced to go where the regime says, and been routinely threatened and insulted. Gaddafi decides which of them can stay in Tripoli and in early April ordered 26 media to leave the country.

Syria - **Bashar el-Assad** **President**

Despite the appearance of privately-owned media outlets, the ruling Baath Party keeps total control of the news. The country’s return to the international scene in 2008 has not changed the situation. Censorship includes the Internet and access to more than 200 websites is blocked. The information ministry began redrafting the press law in 2005 to incorporate the Internet and since 2007 cybercafé managers have been obliged to keep copies of all comments their customers post on chat forums. The government approved a law in late 2010 to further restrict online activity.

Since the street protest movement began in mid-March 2011, threats and physical attacks against journalists have increased and foreigners, notably those working for *AP* and *Reuters* news agencies, have been arrested and deported. Many Syrian journalists and bloggers have been arrested too and the regime has prevented the media from going to cover demonstrations. Entry visas for foreign journalists are hard to get. Syrians and foreigners living in the country are afraid to speak up and the authorities have imposed a media blackout on the protests and on the brutality of police and troops against demonstrators.

Palestinian Territories – **Hamas security forces in Gaza**

Journalists have been paying dearly in the power struggle between Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories since Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007. The resulting major split in the media was aggravated by the lack of agreement between the two movements on holding parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010. The Hamas government has made it clear since June 2007 that it wants to control the media in Gaza, threatening media freedom. After the Gaza branch of the Union of Palestinian Journalists was disbanded, Hamas established a new system of accreditation for all telecommunications and Internet companies as well as broadcast media and news agencies based in the Gaza Strip. Hamas also enforced a 1996 law under which journalists can be imprisoned for putting out news deemed to threaten “national unity.”

Threats, physical violence and arbitrary arrest and detention by Hamas security forces are common. A score of journalists were arrested or roughed up during 2010 by the

Hamas interior ministry's security service. Such measures oblige Palestinian journalists to censor themselves. Security forces have harshly broken up meetings since mid-March 2011 in the centre of Gaza City organised by the "March 15 Coalition" calling for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, and have arrested and beaten journalists, including about 20 on 15 March. Security forces raided many local and foreign media offices on 19 March looking for photos of the crackdown.

Palestinian Territories – The Palestinian Authority's security forces

Journalists have been paying dearly in the power struggle between Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories since Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007. The media is sharply divided between those linked to the Palestinian Authority and those in Hamas-ruled Gaza. Arresting journalists has become a way to settle scores. Nobody is spared and the lack of agreement between the two movements on holding parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010 has aggravated the situation. In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority's security forces and intelligence service controlled by President Mahmoud Abbas made many arbitrary arrests of pro-Hamas journalists in 2010, including about 40 journalists working mainly for the Hamas-funded *Al-Aqsa TV* who were questioned about their work, source of funding and links with Hamas government officials.

Yemen - Ali Abdallah Saleh President

Ali Abdallah Saleh, in power since 1978 and struggling to stay there amid street protests, strengthened his regime's already-tight control over the media in 2009 by imposing a news blackout on military offensives in the north and the south of the country. Journalists and netizens who stray from the official line are routinely arrested, kidnapped or physically attacked. The regime has shut down most of the opposition press and set up a special court to try press offences. Vague and subjective concepts in the 1990 press law such as harming "national security," threatening "national unity" or undermining "the country's foreign relations" are used to gag journalists. Since the 2011 pro-democracy demonstrations began, threats, arrests and physical attacks on journalists have increased as the regime has sought to stifle reporting of the its repression. Two local journalists were killed by government snipers as they covered the protests and the regime closed the offices of *Al Jazeera* in Sanaa. Foreign journalists have been deported and other prevented from getting into the country. Entry visas are hard to get.