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Somalia: Somaliland journalists under fire

Journalists in the self-declared republic of Somaliland are increasingly being harassed and arrested by security forces there, say officials.

“More than 60 journalists were arrested in the first six months of 2012 compared to less than 20 journalists in the last six months of 2011,” Mohamed-Rashid Muhumed Farah, secretary general of the Somaliland Journalists Association (SOLJA), told IRIN.

“For example, a national TV reporter has been harassed. [There have been] midnight attacks on media offices and residences by the newly established rapid reaction unit of the police. Torturing of journalists in the police stations [is] now taking place.”

The concern is shared by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). “Somaliland had an unprecedented number of detentions of journalists this year. In the first half of the year, we’ve seen over 50 journalists arbitrarily arrested and detained briefly by authorities. The fact that these detentions occur without warrants or often any reason demonstrates how the ruling party misuses its position to silence critical voices,” said Tom Rhodes, CPJ’s East Africa consultant.

“Many journalists in Hargeisa [the Somaliland capital], told me that they are compelled to self-censor to avoid such detentions, not a good sign for democracy,” said Rhodes. “On the other hand, the level of detentions of journalists decreased dramatically in the second half of 2012, so there is hope that this practice will diminish and the Kulmiye party will stick to its original democratic principles.”

The Kulmiye - or Peace, Unity and Development - party of Somaliland President Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud “Silanyo” [came into power](#) in 2010.

“The increasing arrest of journalists has two consequences: The independent media is the place where people monitor the reality of their country and evaluate their leaders’ job performance; for this reason, if they [journalists] are arrested or [harassed], people will lose their right to information. If the people don’t get the information they need, the consequence will be the start of a new dictatorship,” said Khadar Nour, the chairman of the Community Centre for Research and Training, a local NGO.

A need for training

Ahmed Suliaman Dhuhul, the Somaliland president’s spokesman, said that the government is not aware of the arrests of ‘more than 60 journalists’. “Sometimes, media practitioners may claim that they were arrested if they were called for [questioning] by the police,” said Dhuhul. “All the citizens, including journalists, have equal rights before

the law and each one of them can be arrested [if they are under suspicion] for questioning. Also we believe that no one is arrested without [a] warrant.”

“Journalists should respect the country's security and credibility, which is in the interest of everybody,” he added.

A lack of proper journalistic and legal training could partly be to blame.

“Both the government and the journalists [don't] have enough knowledge. For example, the journalists sometimes mix news and [opinions]; it is not their fault, but they need to be trained more. Also, the government officials don't seek legal ways to sue journalists but they take the law into their hands and order arrests,” Mohamed Mohamoud Kastam, who has been practising journalism for 30 years, told IRIN.

Article 32 of the Somaliland constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and the independence of the media. Somaliland also has a law that regulates the press, but neither the incumbent Kulmiye government nor the former government of Dahir Riyale Kalin implemented it, said SOLJA's Farah.

Under threat

Somaliland's journalists have been under threat since 1991, when the government of the late President Abdi-Rahman Ahmed Ali Tuur arrested and imprisoned the editors of more than six daily newspapers.

“These journalists were the first people imprisoned [at the] Hargeisa prison, but the situation got better and the media continued to work independently,” said Mohamed Rashid, SOLJA's secretary general. “But this government of Kulmiye, which campaigned to respect the independent media, now seems the worst government [for the press].”

Somalia is becoming [increasingly dangerous](#) for journalists, with at least 15 killed this year alone. Since 2007, at least 22 journalists there have been killed, [according to CPJ](#).
