

Algeriet (2)

65

ATTACKS on the PRESS in 2002

ALGERIA

تقرير 2002 بالعربية

Overview

Algeria

Bahrain

Egypt

Iran

Iraq

Israel and the
Occupied
Territories

Jordan

Kuwait

Lebanon

Mauritania

Morocco

Qatar

Saudi Arabia

Sudan

Syria

Tunisia

Turkey

United Arab
Emirates

Yemen

Algeria's private press has survived a brutal, extremist-led assassination campaign that lasted from 1993 to 1996 and took the lives of 58 journalists. Since the early 1990s, it has also weathered government interference. Nevertheless, the private press has earned a reputation for tough criticism of the government and politicians.

Algerians can choose from an assortment of publications, including a number of private and state-owned dailies. Private papers, which began appearing in 1990, have actively reported on the political violence that has plagued the country for more than a decade, as well as on recent unrest in the eastern Kabylia region. Radio and television are state-owned and reflect government views. Although coverage in the private press is generally feisty, it has also occasionally been accused of having allegiances to certain politicians and political interests.

In 2001, President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika, who has had a bitter relationship with the media, signed into law a series of amendments to the country's Penal Code that prescribe prison terms of up to one year and fines of up to 250,000 dinars (US\$3,200) for defaming the president. The amendments mandate similar punishments for defaming Parliament, the courts, and the military. During 2001, officials took advantage of these repressive new statutes, engendering self-censorship among many journalists.

In February, following a complaint from the Defense Ministry, the government charged Selima Tlemcani, a journalist for the French-language daily *El-Watan*, with defaming the army in a December 11, 2001, article she wrote accusing the military police of financial misconduct. *El-Watan* editor Omar Belhouichet was also named in the suit.

The Defense Ministry lodged defamation complaints against at least three other journalists—cartoonist Ali Dilem of the daily *Liberté*, *Le Matin* editor Muhammad Benchicou, and cartoonist Ahmed Hisham. Their cases were still pending at year's end. However, in a separate case filed by the ministry against Dilem, he was fined 10,000 dinars (US\$130) in December, becoming the first journalist to be convicted under the Penal Code amendments. The case stemmed from a cartoon he had drawn of former president Mohammad Boudiaf, who was assassinated in the early 1990s.

In February, prosecutors attempted to reinstate a one-year suspended prison sentence that had been handed down against *El-Watan*'s Belhouichet in 1997. The sentence stemmed from statements he had made to the French media hinting that government officials may have been responsible for the murders of some journalists during the country's civil war, between 1993 and 1996.

Journalists were also physically attacked or threatened. In July, thugs connected with local businessman Saad Garboussi in the western town of Tebessa violently assaulted *El-Watan* reporter Abdelhai Beliardouh in his home. Beliardouh had written an article alleging that the Garboussi, who heads the local chamber of commerce, had been previously arrested because of financial links with Islamist militants. The assailants subsequently brought Beliardouh to Garboussi's home where the businessman

demanding to know the journalist's sources for his story and threatened to kill his family. Beliardouh died in November from complications sustained in a suicide attempt. His colleagues at *El-Watan* believe he attempted suicide because he was distressed about the incident with Garboussi.

Beliardouh's ordeal highlights the dangers that journalists in Algeria still face. The mid-1990s murders of 58 reporters and editors—a figure that does not include numerous other media workers who were killed—remain unsolved. Islamist militants have been blamed for most of the killings, but many local journalists suspect state involvement in some of the incidents. The government has kept its investigations of the killings closed and has forbidden independent international inquiries. Officials say they have identified 20 of the killers and have sentenced them to death in absentia, but these claims are impossible to verify.

Meanwhile, the whereabouts of missing journalists Djamel Eddine Fahassi and Aziz Bouabdallah remain unknown. CPJ investigations have revealed that state security agents were likely responsible for their abductions, in 1995 and 1997, respectively. But Algerian authorities continue to deny involvement in the disappearances and have failed to undertake serious investigations to determine their fates.

Algeria's press is not as diverse as it was in the early 1990s. Although new publications have been licensed in recent years—including the independent daily *Al-Jeel* and *Al-Ahdath* in 2002—some journalists complain that authorities have ignored license requests.

Fear of government reprisal, ideological prejudices, and limited information keep the media from covering sensitive topics, such as human rights, military corruption, and the military's controversial role in national politics. According to several reporters, many journalists work for or have close ties with intelligence officers.

Foreign journalists continue to encounter restrictions. The government requires bodyguards to accompany many foreign reporters—supposedly for safety reasons. Some journalists, however, contend that the escorts seek to control rather than protect. In May, prior to parliamentary elections, the government temporarily barred foreign reporters from entering the Kabylia region, where anti-government protests have lasted for more than a year.

February 25

Selima Tlemcani, *El-Watan*
Omar Belhouchet, *El-Watan*

LEGAL ACTION

Tlemcani, a journalist at the French-language daily *El-Watan*, was charged with defaming the army following a complaint filed by the Defense Ministry. The case stemmed from a December 11, 2001, *El-Watan* article she had written accusing the military police of financial misconduct.

El-Watan editor Belhouchet accompanied her to court. Although Belhouchet was not named in the original complaint against Tlemcani, the presiding judge added the editor's name to the charges during the course of the proceedings.

A trial date for the two was set for March 18, but by year's end, no trial had taken place.

A week before Tlemcani appeared in court with her editor, prosecutors had attempted to reinstate a 1997 judgment against Belhouchet. That case stemmed from statements Belhouchet had made to the French media hinting that Algeria government officials may have been responsible for the murders of some journalists during the country's civil war, between 1993 and 1996.

In November 1997, Belhouchet received a one-year suspended sentence, a conviction that he later appealed. He told CPJ that authorities never pursued the case after his appeal, and that he was surprised that the government had revived the case.

A court was expected to rule on the 1997 case before March 4, but by year's end no decision had been announced.

