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Libyan journalists threatened by rival militias



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The chaotic situation in Libya in recent years has made the country extremely dangerous for journalists and media outlets, says Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Press freedom, which was non-existent under Muammar Gaddafi, has improved little since his overthrow in 2011, which country plunged into civil war and domination by militias.

“The situation in Libya is particularly difficult for media professionals. The international community must take a firm and strong stand on the need to safeguard press freedom in the face of threats and pressure on journalists from armed factions. All parties to the conflict in Libya need to realise that the protection of journalists should be one of their priorities because, no matter how serious the political situation, Libyans need independent media and protected journalists.”

Khaled Drareni

RSF's North Africa representative

Clashes at the end of August provided a reminder that this repeated violence has a major impact on the work of journalists in the field. Fierce fighting between armed groups – which are mostly financed by the various Libyan authorities, sometimes with help from foreign countries, according to RSF sources – broke out in several Tripoli districts on 28 August against a backdrop of rivalry between the two competing governments. It left a death toll of at least 30, again according to RSF sources. Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, the prime minister of the government of national unity, responded by issuing a warrant for the arrest of all those who participated in what he called an “aggression” against Tripoli.

The rival government is headed by Fathi Bashagha, who was chosen as prime minister-designate by the parliament based in the east of the country. Dbeibeh refuses to hand over power to anything other than a government mandated by a newly elected parliament. The recent fighting in Tripoli highlighted the difficulties that journalists encounter every day as a result of the chaotic political and security situation, which prevents them from being free to report in the field.

The head of a local media outlet that struggled to cover the latest fighting told RSF:

“Libya’s media are experiencing moments of political and military tension that make it very hard for us to do our work properly even if it is absolutely necessary to follow events and inform people. For my part, I tried to go out on to the street to cover the clashes from afar, but I immediately received threats from several armed people whose affiliation I don’t even know.”

He added that he did not even have a helmet and bulletproof vest that would not only give him some protection but also serve to identify him as a journalist to the warring factions.

The leaders of the factions think there are no independent journalists in Libya and that they are all controlled by one or other of the clans. This makes journalists potential targets. A reporter used to working in the field, who we will not name for security reasons, said: “Independent journalistic work is almost impossible today in Libya, particularly during clashes between militias. Reporting statements or facts objectively can have serious consequences for the reporter.”

He added: “Everything also depends on where you are located geographically. Journalists based in the west cannot speak freely about political groups and militias in Tripoli. The situation is similar for journalists based in the east of the country.” He said reporting is much easier for foreign journalists in Libya because less attention is paid

to the international media and their reporters are therefore subject to much less “supervision” than local media.

Libya has seen many press freedom violations in recent months, of which the most prominent was the abduction of Ali Al-Rifawi, a reporter for the privately-owned 218 TV channel who was **kidnapped** in the city of Sirte on 26 March and was not released until 5 July, after 100 days in captivity.

A physical attack on Mohamed Messaoud, a correspondent of the international TV news channel Al Arabiya, in the eastern city of Tobruk was also widely reported. Messaoud was covering a session of the Tobruk-based parliament on 15 August when he was assaulted by individuals later identified as members of Libyan Internal Security. RSF condemned this attack at the time and called on the Libyan authorities to guarantee journalists' safety.

At a time when attacks on freedoms are on the rise in Libya, no faction or party has clearly expressed a desire to prioritise the defence of press freedom. On the contrary, the fact that many Libyan media outlets belong to or depend on one or other faction makes it almost impossible for them to be independent.

One of the Libyan journalists we consulted said he thought most media in Libya belong to one or other of the rival factions, which forces journalists to defend the positions of the faction that employs them. This has been the situation since the last elections in 2014.

MIDDLE EAST - NORTH AFRICA

Libya

143 /180

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