China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt are world's worst jailers of journalists

Committee to Protect Journalists

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Editor's note: In mid-2020, CPJ revised the number of imprisoned journalists from 250 to 248 after learning that two journalists had died in prison prior to December 1, 2019: Jihad Jamal, of Syria (who died in 2016), and Samuel Wazizi, of Cameroon. Those two are now listed in CPJ's database of journalists killed in relation to their work.

For the fourth consecutive year, at least 250 journalists are imprisoned globally as authoritarians like Xi Jinping, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Mohammed bin Salman, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi show no signs of letting up on the critical media. A CPJ special report by Elana Beiser

Journalists Imprisoned in 2019: Infographic Video

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The number of journalists imprisoned globally for their work in 2019 remained near record highs, as China tightened its iron grip on the press and Turkey, having stamped out virtually all independent reporting, released journalists awaiting trial or appeal. Authoritarianism, instability, and protests in the Middle East led to a rise in the number of journalists locked up in the region — particularly in Saudi Arabia, which is now on par with Egypt as the third worst jailer worldwide.

In its annual global survey, the Committee to Protect Journalists found at least 250 journalists in jail in relation to their work, compared with an adjusted 255 a year earlier. The highest number of journalists imprisoned in any year since CPJ began keeping track is 273 in 2016. After China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, the worst jailers are Eritrea, Vietnam, and Iran.

While the majority of journalists imprisoned worldwide face anti-state charges, in line with recent years, the number charged with "false news" rose to 30 compared with 28 last year. Use of the charge, which the government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi applies most prolifically, has climbed steeply since 2012, when CPJ found only one journalist worldwide facing the allegation. In the past year, repressive countries including Russia and Singapore have enacted laws criminalizing the publication of "fake news."

This year's census marks the first time in four years that Turkey has not been the world's worst jailer, but the reduced number of prisoners does not signal an improved situation for the Turkish media. Rather, the fall to 47 journalists in jail from 68 last year reflects the successful efforts by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to stamp out independent reporting and criticism by closing down more than 100 news outlets and lodging terror-related charges against many of their staff. With the industry gutted by government shutdowns and takeovers, and scores of journalists in exile, jobless, or cowed into self-censorship, authorities on October 24 enacted a legislative package that granted new appeals on convictions for certain offenses — including "propaganda for a terrorist organization," a favorite charge of prosecutors — and shortened some pretrial detention periods.

Dozens of journalists not currently jailed in Turkey are still facing trial or appeal and could yet be sentenced to prison, while others have been sentenced in absentia and face arrest if they return to the country. So many people in Turkey — tens of thousands of military personnel, police, legislators, judges, and prosecutors as well as journalists, according to news reports – have been charged with crimes since a failed coup attempt in 2016 that what is left of law enforcement and the judiciary seem barely able to keep up. One journalist, Semiha Şahin, described to CPJ how she was released to house arrest pending trial but, because she was never fitted with an electronic monitoring

device, she is effectively free but lives in fear of being caught and returned immediately to prison.

Journalist Nazli Ilicak is embraced after her release from prison in Istanbul in November 2019, after a court ordered her free on time served at a retrial. Two of her colleagues remain in prison on terrorism related charges, among the 47 journalists jailed in Turkey. (Reuters/Huseyin Aldemir)

Since CPJ began keeping track of journalists in prison in the early 1990s, Turkey has frequently vied with China for the ignominious title of the world's worst jailer. In 2019, CPJ found at least 48 journalists jailed in China, one more than in 2018; the number has steadily increased as President Xi Jinping consolidated political control of the country and instituted ever tighter controls on the media. In one recent Chinese case, Sophia Huang Xueqin, a freelancer who formerly worked as an investigative reporter at Chinese outlets, was arrested in October shortly after describing on her blog what it was like to march with the pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. She faces charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a common anti-state allegation levied against critics whom the ruling Chinese Communist Party view as a threat.

A crackdown in Xinjiang province — where a million members of Muslim ethnic groups have been sent to internment camps — has led to the arrests of dozens of

journalists, including some apparently jailed for journalistic activity years earlier. Of the four affiliated with the state-owned Kashgar Publishing House, which issued books and periodicals on topics including politics and legal and demographic developments, two editors had retired at least a decade earlier.

Authorities in Saudi Arabia — where the number of journalists jailed has risen steadily since 2011 — also targeted several journalists who had apparently ceased working. In 2019, the Gulf kingdom was holding at least 26 journalists behind bars, making it the third worst jailer alongside Egypt. Saudi authorities barely make any pretense of due process; no charges have been disclosed in 18 of the cases, and those who have been tried have been sentenced in a secretive and often rushed manner. There are widespread reports of torture; medical reports leaked to *The Guardian* in the spring detailed evidence of authorities beating, burning, and starving political prisoners, including four journalists. The arrests and documented abuse show how Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who U.S. intelligence services and an independent inquiry by a U.N. rapporteur say is responsible for the 2018 murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi, continues his brutal crackdown on dissent.

Saudi participants at the Future Investment Initiative stand for the national anthem in front of a screen displaying images of Saudi King Salman, right, and Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman, on October 28, 2019, in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia had at least 26 journalists in prison at the end of 2019. (AP Photo/Amr Nabil)

Violent abuse also characterized at least one recent arrest in Egypt. On October 12, plainclothes security officers in unmarked vehicles forced a car carrying reporter and columnist Esraa Abdelfattah off the road in greater Cairo, dragged her from the car and beat her, according to her friend and fellow journalist Mohamed Salah, with whom she was traveling. In custody, Abdelfattah alleges she was beaten a second time for refusing to unlock her phone, and then shackled for hours. Salah said the officers at the initial encounter blindfolded and beat him, then took him to a deserted highway, questioned him for an hour, took his phone's SIM card, and left him there. Authorities arrested Salah six weeks later and he remains jailed.

In total, the number of journalists in Egyptian jails rose only slightly from last year to 26, as several were released during the year. But in another cruel manifestation of Egypt's fear of critical journalists, authorities ordered some released prisoners, notably award-winning photographer Mahmoud Abou Zeid, known as Shawkan, and prominent blogger Alaa Abdelfattah to check in at a police station every evening. While it is up to the discretion of officers on duty whether they must stay or merely check in and leave, Shawkan has spent every night at a police station since his release from Tora prison March 4, according to a relative, leading CPJ to maintain his listing as imprisoned. Abdelfattah also spent every night in jail for six months, his sister said, until he was re-arrested on September 29.

Several of the fresh arrests in Egypt came ahead of protests against army corruption on September 19, which included calls for President el-Sisi to resign. Most of the journalists jailed in Egypt are grouped in mass trials and charged with both terror offenses and false news.

Iran, which also saw significant protests in 2019, increased the number of journalists in jail to 11. Prominent economic reporter Mohammad Mosaed was arrested after tweeting during an internet shutdown intended to suppress news of protests against high gas prices, "Hello Free World!" and that he was using "42 different proxies" to get online. At least three journalists were also jailed in Algeria amid pro-democracy protests.

Russia had seven journalists in custody, four of them because of their work in occupied Crimea documenting the Crimean Tatar minority population and Russian attacks on them.

Of 39 journalists jailed in sub-Saharan Africa, the bulk remain in Eritrea, where most have not been heard from for nearly two decades; Cameroon was second worst. While the number of journalists in prison in that region is broadly steady with last year, CPJ finds that freedom of expression is backsliding in two of the most populous countries, Ethiopia and Nigeria, which does not bode well for journalists.

Vietnam remained Asia's second-worst jailer after China, with 12 behind bars. In all of the Americas, three journalists were jailed.

Other findings from CPJ's annual census include:

- Ninety-eight percent of journalists jailed worldwide are locals covering their own country. Three of the four journalists with foreign citizenship are imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, and the fourth in China.
- Twenty of the jailed journalists, or 8%, are female, compared with 13% last year.
- Politics was the beat most likely to land journalists in jail, followed by human rights and corruption.
- More than half of those imprisoned were reporters publishing online.

CPJ this year converted decades worth of research on imprisoned journalists into a database and revised the historical numbers to eliminate duplication; count people from the date of their arrest rather than the date CPJ learned of their case; and retroactively apply the methodology as consistently as possible. Going forward, each year's census is likely to result in minor adjustments to the previous years' numbers as CPJ learns of arrests, releases, or deaths in prison. In 2019, news emerged of the death of one journalist CPJ had listed in Syrian prisons, Ali Mahmoud Othman. Also this year, CPJ found six new prisoners who had been jailed before 2019 and discovered that one previous Chinese prisoner was jailed for her poetry. Accordingly, CPJ adjusted the number of journalists imprisoned last year to 255 from 251 reported in December 2018.

Methodology

The prison census accounts only for journalists in government custody and does not include those who have disappeared or are held captive by non-state actors. (These cases—including several journalists held by Houthi rebels in Yemen and Ukrainian journalist Stanyslav Aseyev held by pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's east—are classified as "missing" or "abducted.")

CPJ defines journalists as people who cover the news or comment on public affairs in any media, including print, photographs, radio, television, and online. In its annual prison census, CPJ includes only those journalists who it has confirmed have been imprisoned in relation to their work.

CPJ believes that journalists should not be imprisoned for doing their jobs. In the past year, CPJ advocacy helped lead to the early release of at least 80 imprisoned journalists worldwide.

CPJ's list is a snapshot of those incarcerated at 12:01 a.m. on December 1, 2019. It does not include the many journalists imprisoned and released throughout the year; accounts of those cases can be found at https://cpj.org. Journalists remain on CPJ's list until the organization determines with reasonable certainty that they have been released or have died in custody.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.

The Ted K Archive
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