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Middle East/North Africa - Algeria

Tense election

Authorities urged to allow reporters to cover election freely

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Reporters Without Borders urges the Algerian authorities to allow both Algerian and foreign journalists to freely cover tomorrow's presidential election.

"We registered arrests of Algerian journalists during street protests against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fourth term, and this does not bode well for their ability to cover this elections in an unimpeded manner," said Lucie Morillon, head of research at Reporters Without Borders.

"As for foreign journalists, many of them were issued visas late in the day accompanied by drastic restrictions, and yet the international media have a important role to play in a country in which the domestic media are badly lacking in pluralism and the level of self-censorship is very high."

Minfield for foreign journalists

The Algerian authorities tightened their grip on visa requests by foreign journalists. Visas are usually issued in two weeks but have been taking much longer in the run-up to the elections.

Journalists with French media (*L'Express*, *Le Point*, *Journal du Dimanche*, *Le Monde* and *BFMTV*), German media (*FAZ* and *ZDF*) and Spanish media (*Agencia EFE* and *El Mundo*) have all had to wait many weeks and have only received visas in the past few days.

They will be able to cover voting day itself but, in practice, they have been prevented from doing any investigative reporting ahead of what is a crucial election for Algeria, one marked by protests about Bouteflika's candidacy and questions about his health problems, which have prevented him from campaigning.

Some media told Reporters Without Borders that the late delivery of visas has forced them to abandon plans for certain stories and campaign coverage.

The visas are subject to geographic, editorial and time restrictions. Foreign reporters must obtain special permits to visit certain regions. The documents they get from the information ministry instruct them [to limit their questions to matters relating to the election](#). And the visits expire on 20 April, just three days after the first round, which suggests that either the authorities are ruling out a second round or intend to subject journalists to a second application process.

Difficulties covering pre-election protests

Several journalists were arrested while covering pre-election protests or were harassed afterwards for reporting them.

Echorouk TV reporter **Zineb Benzita** said she and several other journalists [were arrested while covering a demonstration](#) outside the Benyoucef-Benkhedda Faculty in Algiers in 1 March. *"I wasn't participating in the demonstration, I was just there as part of my work,"* she said.

Hacen Ouali, a political reporter for the daily *El Watan*, [was arrested](#) along with other journalists on 6 March while trying to cover a demonstration by members of the "Barakat" (That's enough!) movement.

"We showed them our press cards but they didn't give a damn," he told [RFI](#). *"They took all of us away and we spent the entire day in a police station. The police had clearly been told to arrest everyone. It's true that this is not Ben Ali's Tunisia, but it's very tough working as a journalist in Algeria."*

Meziane Abane, a journalist with *Al-Watan Week-End* and an active member of the "[Barakat](#)" movement, was arrested while in his hotel room in Batna, 500 km east of Algiers, on 17 March. He had been planning to do a report on the incidents that rocked the region after Bouteflika's campaign manager, former prime minister Abdelmalek Sellal, mocked someone's Chaoui (Berber) origins while being recorded by journalists.

The prosecution of **Djamel Ghanem**, a cartoonist with the daily *La Voix de l'Oranie*, also caused a stir. He was [accused](#) of "insulting the president" in an unsigned cartoon alluding to Bouteflika's fourth term that was never published. On 11 March, an Oran court acquitted him of the charge, which carried a possible 18-month jail sentence and fine of 30,000 dinars (380 dollars). But the prosecutor's office appealed against his acquittal a week later. Intimidated by the prosecutor's determination and fearing for his and his family's safety, Ghanem decided to leave Algeria and seek asylum in France.

The case of *Al-Atlas TV*, a foreign-owned station that began operating in March 2013, is illustrative. Its premises were raided three times in two days last month. First, plainclothes gendarmes with a search warrant swooped on its headquarters at around 4 p.m. on 11 March. Then gendarmes with no warrant placed seals on the studios 25 km outside Algiers rented by Alpha Broadcast, a production company that supplied *Al-Atlas TV* with programming.

Accompanied by the state prosecutor, police officers returned to the TV station's headquarters on the afternoon of the next day, seizing equipment and placing seals on the computer room. According to the Algérie Focus news website, the authorities then pressured the Jordanian TV satellite operator Noorsat to stop carrying the Al-Atlas TV signal. The signal was removed the next morning (13 March). *Al-Atlas TV's* CEO said the authorities targeted the station because of its critical coverage of the government, and President Bouteflika, in particular. The station also covered the protests by those opposed to a fourth Bouteflika term.

Fake pluralism

Many of the law's provisions restrict freedom of information in a disproportionate manner. They include article 112 on the right of "any person or entity" to respond to articles "attacking national values and national interest," article 123 on "causing offence to foreign heads of state" and article 119 on "publishing a document that violates the confidentiality of a judicial investigation."

Law 11-14 of 2 August 2011 decriminalized defamation of government officials by amending articles 144 (b) and 146 of the criminal code. Similarly, Law 12-05 on information abolished prison sentences for media offences. This should have ended the threat to journalists posed by articles 144 (b), 146 and 77 to 99 of the criminal code, but the fines are disproportionate and articles 296 and 298 of the criminal code maintain prison sentences for defaming individuals.

The state of the media and free speech cannot be gauged by the number of newspapers. Many of them are published directly by businessmen with links to the government and intelligence services. According to a report by the [UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), published on 12 June 2012, fewer than six newspapers are really independent in Algeria.

While judicial proceedings against journalists or media may be slowed down or even "forgotten," the threat of a judicial decision subsequently emerging constitutes a threat that forces journalists to censor themselves.

As for broadcasting, a [new law](#) that was adopted on 20 January is supposed to end the state monopoly that has existed since Algeria obtained independence. But its 113 articles, which aim to regulate and control the broadcast media, will not take effect until after the presidential election.

If it is implemented, [privately-owned TV stations will be allowed to broadcast](#) from Algeria for the first time. But they will have to be thematic in nature, and the length of their news programmes will be limited. The state will continue to have a monopoly of general news TV stations.

Many groups have voiced concern about the lack of independence of the Broadcasting [Regulatory Authority](#) (ARAV) that is to be created. Its nine members will be appointed by presidential decree and five of them will be chosen by the president himself. Its powers include the ability to restrict the length of the news programmes of the privately-owned stations.

The print media, which have been pluralistic in principle since the 1990s, continue to suffer from monopolistic practices, especially as regards printing and distribution. Most are dependent on state-controlled printing houses (such as the Société d'Impression d'Alger) and

distribution networks, and the state acts as it sees fit, deciding arbitrarily which publications will be printed and distributed.

Advertising is also used to pressure the media. Created in December 1967 and operational since April 1968, the National Publishing and Advertising Agency (ANEP) allocates advertising on behalf of state agencies and companies. State advertising is a major source of funding for the print media and strings are always attached to its renewal. Private sector advertising often comes from companies that support the ruling political elite and is above all channelled to newspapers that kowtow to the military and the Intelligence and Security Department (DRS)

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