



LIBYA:
**“We can criticise Allah
but not Gaddafi”**

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How do you characterize the current situation in Libya? “Relaxation” was the term used by one well-informed observer interviewed by a Reporters Without Borders delegation during a visit to Tripoli from 13 to 17 September. Arranged by the Union of Libyan Journalists, our trip came after 20 years of refused visa requests. It followed visits by Amnesty International in 2004 and Human Rights Watch in 2005 and was, in itself, evidence of this “relaxation.” It enabled us to meet journalists, administrators, officials and cyber-dissident Abdel Razak Al Mansuri, who got out of prison in March after being held for more than a year for an article posted on a website (see below).

This “opening-up” began after an 11-year-old UN embargo was finally lifted on 12 September 2003. It has been accompanied by a diplomatic U-turn and an economic opening-up, particularly in tourism. On the other hand, there has been little change in the political and ideological domain, which lies at the very heart of the system. This may explain a comment made in

August by Seif al-Islam Gaddafi, the president’s son and potential successor, in which he criticised the lack of press freedom in the country his father has ruled since 1969.

The comment struck the media world like a thunderbolt. Its initial effect has been to loosen tongues and get people talking. But it must be said that certain events in recent months show that there have not yet been any decisive changes in the media landscape. And the murder of journalist Daif Al Ghazal in May 2005 (see below) and the imprisonment of cyber-dissident Abdel Razak Al Mansuri have served as reminders that this is one of the most repressive regimes for those that criticise it.

Most of the journalists we met who are critical of the regime do not dare to speak out openly. They are scared of reprisals. They think the promises are encouraging but the current reality is quite different. They point out that Libya has no privately-owned media. And saying anything critical about the Guide is simply unthinkable.

Propaganda machine

“We can criticise Allah but not Gaddafi.” This comment by one of the journalists we met sums up the impact of censorship in Libya well. Criticising the “brother leader” is lese-majesty. It can get you in prison. The personality cult rolls on. Pictures of the Guide line the main avenues of the country’s cities and adorn the walls of every hotel, restaurant and shop. It is the same in the newspapers. Muammar Gaddafi’s activities, whatever they are, are front-page stories in all four of the leading newspapers. On 14 September, for example, when the Guide was receiving congratulations from delegations during festivities marking the revolution’s 37th anniversary, three of the four newspapers ran the same article about it. As for international news, it is provided almost exclusively by the government news agency *Jana*.

If anyone voices astonishment at this lack of independence, there is a ready response. “We don’t need privately-owned newspapers,” a member of the Press Union told Reporters Without Borders. “Libya has direct democracy. The press is an emanation of the people.” He added: “The Guide has no institutional role. He advises and inspires the people.” Gaddafi’s Green Book says: “The press is society’s means of expression, not the means of expression of an individual person or company. Logically and democratically, it cannot be owned by individuals or companies.”

The print media

So Libya has no privately-owned press. Three of the four leading dailies (*Al Jamahiriya*, *Al Shams*, and *Al Fajr al Jadid*) are financed by the General Press Office, an offshoot of the information ministry. They are located in the same building and are run by the same board. It is currently headed by Abdel Razak Massoud Al Dashash, who is also *Al Jamahiriya*’s editor. The fourth main daily, *Al Zahf al-Akhdar*, belongs to the Revolutionary Committees Movement, the regime’s central pillar.

All four newspapers use the same distribution network, which has very few points of sale. There are just 25 in Tripoli, serving 1.5 million inhabitants. The four newspapers all suffer from the same technological backwardness including crude layout and poor print quality. Some of the

staff members we met nonetheless said they are awaiting a new press from Germany.

There are some differences between the four newspapers. The most widely-distributed one, the tabloid *Al Jamahiriya*, claims to print between 8,000 and 15,000 copies. It includes several sections dealing with some of the problems Libyans encounter in their daily lives such as poorly-surfaced roads or the lack of road signs in some areas. *Al Shams* editor Mohammad Al Mirghani says his newspaper also reflects some of the problems encountered by the population. “For example, we openly criticised Libya’s prisons after getting permission to visit them.” he told Reporters Without Borders.



Libya’s four leading dailies, from top to bottom: *Al Fajr al Jadid*, *Al Shams*, *Al Zahf al-Akhdar* and *Al Jamahiriya*

Al Fajr al Jadid is a general news daily that is usually happy to print the government news agency’s dispatches. *Al Zahf* is even closer to the government. It is the only newspaper to have criticised the president’s son after his recent “progressive” remarks. Its editorial position is clear – support Muammar Gaddafi come what may. The leader’s activities are front-page stories every day. Four of its seven reports were about him in its 14 September issue.

Libya :
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There are also a score of specialised weeklies and monthlies, many of them about women and children. Each of the 26 provinces also has a newspaper – either a weekly or a monthly.

These newspapers are experimenting cautiously with criticism, reporting for example on “low-level corruption.” But they are well aware that certain individuals and subjects cannot be touched – the Guide and his family, the status of the Berbers, or corruption involving senior officials.

Television and radio

The broadcast media are totally controlled by the government. There is a national terrestrial TV station and half a dozen satellite stations. But viewers have abandoned them for foreign TV stations, especially *Al-Jazeera*. The privately-owned Saudi TV station *Al Arabiya* and the privately-owned Lebanese TV station *LBCI* also enjoy a degree of success in Libya, while Lebanon’s *Al-Manar* and the Iran’s *Al-Aalam* drew viewers during the Israeli offensive against Lebanon in July. There is a great deal of interest in the TV station that the Gaddafi Development Foundation is supposed to launch by the end of the year. Some provinces also have their local TV station.

In the view of some members of the Union of Journalists, the Libyan press relies on journalists with little or poor training. They said about 400 or 500 graduate each year from the university. Deputy information minister Abdel Majid El-Dersi told Reporters Without Borders that his minister, who has been in the job since March, had brought together everyone involved in the media scene – journalists, unionists and lawyers – to discuss how to improve the Libyan media both in terms of training and technology.

Internet... with unrestricted access

There are absolutely no restrictions on using Libya’s public Internet access points. You do not have to show an ID card. Reporters Without Borders was able to access the websites of international human rights and press freedom groups and Libyan opposition groups abroad. But although there is no filtering, the Internet is clearly monitored. Mansuri and Ghazal paid the price for voicing their dissident views on the Internet (see below).

A draconian press law

The 1972 media law is extremely repressive. Six of its articles provide for prison sentences ranging from one month to two years. Article 29 alone lists 12 circumstance in which the punishment is prison. For example, “doubting the aims of the revolution” in article 29’s fifth subsection is punishable by imprisonment for an unspecified period and a fine of 1,000 dinars (650 euros). The deputy information minister said a commission of experts and journalists was currently working on new press legislation. Its conclusions are to be made known in early 2007, he said.

As for defamation complaints, the Union of Journalists said they were initially studied by a media responsibility commission formed of journalists and lawyers. General Press Office director Abdel Razak Massoud Al Dashash said the commission had dealt with “about 20 cases, which for the most part were resolved by granting a right of reply.” The journalists we met said that, at the local level, most cases were settled out of court. But one local journalist pointed out: “How can there be defamation if the entire press corps is under the heel of the authorities?”

Foreign press under surveillance

International media (including the news agencies *Agence France-Presse*, *Associated Press* and *Reuters* and the pan-Arab TV station *Al-Jazeera*) currently employ some 20 Libya-based journalists as their local correspondents. Mostly Libyans, they have to be accredited with the information ministry’s department of relations with the international press and are exposed to harassment. There is no shortage of anecdotes about bad-tempered authorities who do not hesitate to complain to the local correspondents’ editors.



Cards issued by the authorities to visiting journalists (left) and to accredited journalists based in Libya (right)

Libya :
“We can criticise Allah but not Gaddafi”

Foreign journalists who want to go to Libya can now get a visa more easily than before. But it is not a mere formality. The tendency to suspect a journalist of being a spy lingers on. One foreign journalist told Reporters Without Borders he had to wait more than six months to get his precious entry visa. “And I had to abandon the subjects I’d planned to cover,” he said. Other journalists have had their passports seized at the airport on the grounds that they had not warned the authorities of their arrival. The head of the department of relations with the foreign press claimed to have issued between 1,000 and 1,500 visas in 2005. “Some journalists can even get their visa at the airport,” he said.

While visiting journalists need a permit, which is obtained from the information ministry’s foreign media department, they are not obliged to use a guide or interpreter provided by the authorities. Similarly, they do not need any authorisation to leave the capital. Foreign reporters nonetheless complain about the difficulty of getting access to information. It is virtually impossible to meet any official without prior authorisation from the department of relations with the foreign press. Some journalists who had “official” invitations to cover the revolution’s anniversary celebrations in September were unable to interview any officials. Requests addressed to the foreign press department were in most cases unsuccessful.

Foreign publications appear to be more available than in the past – something the Gaddafi Foundation claims to have pushed for – but it is said many issues are still confiscated on arrival. Article 28 of the 1972 press law authorises the suspension of foreign publications that “harm the country.” The London-based Arabic-language dailies such as *Al Hayat*, *Al Quds Al Arabi* and *Al Sharq Al Awsat* cannot be found in Libyan bookshops, but foreign business newspapers such as the *Financial Times* and US weeklies or monthlies such as the Arabic-version of *Newsweek* can.

Some Libyan newspapers based in Malta, London or Cairo are distributed inside Libya. But a Libyan journalist speaking on condition of anonymity said he had filed several requests to launch a newspaper and then heard nothing further from the authorities. Nonetheless, the press law does not specifically ban the creation of independent newspapers. And Seif al-Islam publicly called for the creation of independent

newspapers in 2003. During a meeting with Reporters Without Borders, deputy prime minister Mohammed Houeich spoke of the possibility of privatising media companies in future.

Human rights... on paper

Libya has ratified several international treaties protecting human rights – the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – but several journalists have been arrested, imprisoned or murdered in recent years. And one journalist has been missing since 1973.

The murder of Daif Al Ghazal

Journalist Daif Al Ghazal was kidnapped while driving his car on the night of 21 May 2005 near Benghazi. Two gunmen forced him to stop and drove off with him their own vehicle. His mutilated body was found in Benghazi 10 days later. The autopsy report said there were many signs of torture. Most of his fingers had been cut off. There were stab wounds and bruising to his body. He had also been shot once in the head.

Ghazal worked for 10 years for the Revolutionary Committees Movement, leaving it in 2003 because he no longer agreed with its goals. After contributing to the daily *Al Zahf al-Akhdar* for nearly four years, Ghazal decided to stop writing for the governmental press altogether. He even launched an appeal to Libyan intellectuals for the creation of “a civil committee against corruption. Branded as a “coward” by the Revolutionary Committees Movement, he defiantly replied that he was not afraid and would never stay silent.

Salem Mohammed, editor of the London-based news website *libya-alyoum.com*, said the articles Ghazal wrote for his site during that period were extremely critical of the Revolutionary Committees Movement and the government.

Ghazal’s family wrote to the Gaddafi Foundation asking it to “intervene to shed light on the circumstances of the disappearance and death” of Ghazal and to “open an investigation into this case.” The foundation responded positively, promising to do everything in its power to have his murderers arrested.

Reporters Without Borders contacted Ghazal's brother during its visit to Libya. He said he was counting on the Gaddafi Foundation and did not want to meet us. Saleh Abdussalam Saleh, the foundation's executive director, declined to specify whether Ghazal's murder was a press case saying he preferred to "await the result of the investigation under way." Seif al-Islam, the foundation's president, promised to hold a news conference at the end of August in which he would reveal new information about the "Daif Al Ghazal case" but it ended up being cancelled. Since then Gaddafi's son has said nothing about the case.

Some journalists close to the government have said Ghazal's murder was not linked to his work as a journalist. Others, speaking on condition of anonymity, do not hesitate to say that the regime is perfectly capable of such excesses. One journalist told Reporters Without Borders: "Daif Al Ghazal was a close supporter of the regime before defecting. Some people may have seen this as an act of treason."

A year and a half in prison for an Internet article



"I owe my release to a person close to Col. Gaddafi," Abdel Razak Al Mansuri (photo) told Reporters Without Borders during a meeting arranged by the Union of Libyan Journalists. A former book-

shop owner and regular contributor to an independent news website, he was sentenced by a Tripoli court on 19 October 2005 to 18 months in prison. Officially, he was convicted of "unauthorised possession of a pistol." But the real reason was almost certainly his articles criticising the regime on the www.akbar-libya.com website. He was pardoned in March after being held for a year. He told Reporters Without Borders he still has not got his ID papers back. Several journalists have promised to help him. The editor of a daily has also offered him a job. Mansuri said he has launched a new website.

Missing for 33 years

Abdallah Ali al-Sanussi al Darrat disappeared in 1973. None of the people we talked to was able to provide any new leads on this case. The Gaddafi Foundation undertook to carry out an

investigation and to tell Reporters Without Borders if it discovered anything.

Has Libya changed?

Those who follow its foreign and economic policies readily say that it has. Tripoli has broken with international terrorism, recognised its misdeeds and compensated its victims. Col. Gaddafi has turned his back on militant pan-Arabism and has initiated a rapprochement with the United States, of which he was for many years one of the most violent adversaries. He has distributed shares in Libya's petroleum industry to his new western partners and "friends" and holds out the prospect of profits to be made in a liberalised economy.

The response is more complex as regards the media. Unquestionably something has changed. But the opening is very limited and just concerns coverage of social and economic issues. As regards politics, everything is still locked down and "revolutionary rhetoric" continues to be ubiquitous. Out of fear or conviction? Almost certainly a bit of both. Everyone seems to distrust their neighbour to the point of constantly overdoing the ideological content of their discourse. Until there are truly independent media, it will not be possible to talk of real progress.

However, the regime seems anything but homogenous. Different views co-exist even in Union of Journalists. Some journalists seem much more sensitive to the reactions of international organisations than in the past, which raises hopes of more significant progress to come, especially as Seif al-Islam and his foundation are playing such a key role in the evolution already taking place. It matters little whether Col. Gaddafi's son wants a complete break with the past or whether he is just trying to salvage something. His comments alone have forced journalists to question what they are doing. They are finally talking about issues which until recently they ignored and, in private, some do not hesitate to approve what he said.

Without prejudging the result of the investigation into Ghazal's death, it has to be stressed that the Libyan authorities are still capable of

misdeeds that could prove dangerous for journalists. The international community, especially European institutions, must accompany those Libyan journalists who want to help the situation to evolve. The European Union must also make Tripoli understand that it will not accept Ghazal's murder remaining unpunished.

Finally, another significant factor must be borne in mind. Thanks to satellite TV and the Internet, Libyans are no longer isolated from the rest of the world, as they were in the past. They have become demanding and will no longer settle for the media imposed by the government. Many people, including those at the highest level of government, are aware of that.

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