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Journalists face increasing harassment in Sudan

A raft of new tactics are being used to silence journalists in Sudan in a crackdown by Khartoum's authorities dating from the start of uprisings in North Africa in January 2011, Amnesty International said in a new briefing released on World Press Freedom Day.

Silencing Dissent: Restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression persist in Sudan explores how the authorities now censor journalists, including by confiscating newspapers after they have been printed; preventing vendors from distributing copies; and charging journalists and editors with spurious crimes.

“Although attacks against freedom of expression are not new to Sudan, the pattern of harassment and intimidation of critics of the government has intensified since January 2011,” said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International's Africa Director.

“Since May 2011, the Sudanese authorities have shut down 15 newspapers, confiscated more than 40 newspaper editions, arrested eight journalists and banned two from writing, seriously curtailing freedom of expression,” van der Borgh said.

In the first two months of 2012 alone, the Sudanese authorities suspended three newspapers using laws contained in the 2010 National Security Act, which allow the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) to ban any publication containing information considered a threat to national security.

In April 2012 the authorities confiscated two issues of the al-Midan after they had been printed, putting a serious financial strain on the newspaper.

In March 2011, Sudanese authorities arrested and charged journalists who had reported on allegations made by Safia Ishaag, a 26-year-old art student and activist who spoke out about being raped, tortured and kicked to the point of unconsciousness by three security agents after they arrested her in Khartoum on 13 February 2011.

Fatima Ghazali, a journalist from Aljareeda newspaper, was fined 2,000 Sudanese pounds (around US\$740) by the Press Court for writing about Safia and calling for an investigation into her ill treatment. The newspaper's editor-in-chief, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, was fined 5,000 Sudanese pounds (around US\$1,860) in relation to the article. Fatima Ghazali initially refused to pay the fine and was detained for two days.

Authorities have also infiltrated social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to crackdown on activists who use these tools to share information and coordinate demonstrations and other public actions.

Activists told Amnesty International that during interrogation by the NISS, they were asked for their email and Facebook passwords.

Amnesty International also found that members of the intelligence and security services have consistently misused legislation and press conduct codes to crack down on dissent.

Article 5(2) of the 2009 Press and Publications Act states: “No restrictions may be applied to the freedom of journalistic publishing save as maintained in this Act with regards to national security protection, public order and health; newspapers shall not be confiscated or shut down nor shall journalists and publishers be imprisoned on issues pertaining to their practice save under the provisions of this Act.”

This vague definition of what cannot be published gives extensive powers to Sudanese authorities to suspend newspapers and publishers “if found in violation of the terms and conditions of the practice”.

The 2009 Journalists’ Code of Conduct states that journalists must “defend the interest, unity, survival and integrity of the homeland”. This stipulation has been used by NISS agents to criminalize freedom of expression, including restricting reporting on armed conflicts in Sudan.

Amnesty International called on the Sudanese authorities to end the crackdown against journalists and activists and investigate all abuses at the hands of the security services.