

Nominees for RSF's press freedom prize

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has released the names of the 22 nominees for the 2016 Reporters Without Borders-TV5 Monde Prize for Press Freedom, which will be awarded to three laureates - a journalist, a media outlet and a citizen journalist - at a ceremony in Strasbourg on November 8. This is the 25th year running that RSF has awarded this prize.



Alfred Taban, founder and editor of The Juba Monitor

Many journalists and bloggers have continued to distinguish themselves in 2016 by the immense courage they display in their daily reporting despite the risks to their lives. Many of this year's nominees, who are from 19 countries, are being prosecuted or are in prison for refusing to censor themselves. Others are exposed to threats and physical violence from those they dare to criticize.

“Authoritarian regimes cracked down harder on journalists and bloggers in 2016,” RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said. “It is no coincidence that nearly half of the nominees work in the bottom 20 of the 180 countries in RSF’s World Press Freedom Index. RSF hails the courage and determination of all these women and men with a common commitment to fighting for freedom of information.”

“A significant number of the nominees are unfortunately in the process of being prosecuted or are languishing in jail solely because they wanted to inform their fellow citizens about matters of public interest,” RSF programme director Lucie Morillon said.

“Those in prison include Egyptian journalist Ismail Alexandrani, Azerbaijani journalist Seymour Khazi and Chinese citizen journalists Chinois Lu Yuyu and Li Tingyu who, like many other citizen journalists all over the world, took over when the authorities stifled the traditional media. We call for their unconditional release and the withdrawal of all the charges against them.”

Nine journalists who take risks

A 29-year-old former nurse from Homs, Hadi Abdullah has had many brushes with death as a freelance reporter who became a target for both government forces and rebel armed groups and saw his cameraman killed. Afghan journalist Najiba Ayubi, the head of the *Killid Media Group*, has also been threatened with death but continues her fight for media freedom.

Colombian investigative reporter Jineth Bedoya continues to defend women who have been the victims of violence; while *Maldives Independent* editor Zaheena Rasheed embodies tenacity in the fight against impunity for crimes of violence against journalists. Rasheed covers highly sensitive stories in her now Islamist country and has been outspoken in her criticism of the authorities since one of her reporters, Ahmed Rilwan, disappeared in 2014. Fearing arrest, she finally fled Maldives in September.

Judicial harassment is a problem shared by Alfred Taban, the well-known founder and editor of South Sudan's first newspaper, *The Juba Monitor*, Mahfuz Anam, the editor of Bangladesh's *Daily Star*, and French investigative journalist Edouard Perrin, who helped to expose the LuxLeaks scandal in Luxembourg. But none of them is in prison. Egyptian investigative reporter Ismail Alexandrani and Seymour Khazi, a well-known reporter for Azerbaijan's sole remaining opposition daily, *Azadlig*, are not so lucky. Both are jailed on trumped-up charges.

Seven pioneering independent media outlets

Seven media outlets distinguished themselves by their exemplary reporting in the face of constant harassment. *Azamn*, the Sultanate of Oman's only independent newspaper, paid a high price for its independence this year. A court closed it down and imposed jail terms on its three most senior editors. The local correspondents of *Fergananews.com*, the website of Central Asia's independent news agency Ferghana, are exposed to similar risks and its reporters in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have to operate clandestinely.

The citizen journalists who report for Chinese human rights website *64Tianwang* are still systematically persecuted but show no sign of giving up. As their editor, 2004 RSF Cyber-Freedom Laureate Huang Qi explained: "In 18 years of activity, none has ever agreed to sign a confession drafted by the authorities." He was referring to the "confessions" that CCTV and Xinhua broadcast with the aim of discrediting government critics.

In Algeria and Libya, two media outlets that emerged just three years ago have made a name for themselves by being outspoken and resolutely defending media freedom. *Radio M*, the first Algiers-based independent web radio, airs a wide range of opinion in a country that gags the media. The *Bawabat Al Wasat* website has established itself as an essential source of news and information amid the chaos and mounting concern about security issues in Libya. It was blocked for nine months from February 2015 because of its coverage of the talks leading to the creation of the Government of National Accord.

Founded by Adam Michnik, the pro-European daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* has become a symbol of opposition to the excesses of the ruling Law and Justice Party, which is waging an all-out crusade against the media. Since its creation in 2011, the Brazilian non-profit news agency *Agência Pública* has produced many reports on environmental and human rights issues, some of them winning awards.

Citizen journalists step up

When the traditional media are unable fulfil their role properly, citizen journalists and bloggers take over the job of providing

independently-reported news and information, often eliciting an angry response from the authorities. This is what happened to Chinese citizen journalists Lu Yuyu and Li Tingyu. After they suddenly stopped sending messages on 15 June, it emerged that they are being held for documenting unrest and work protests – taboo subjects for the ruling Communist Party.

Blogger Ali Al-Mearaj was arrested in June for criticizing the Bahraini regime and is now charged with supporting terrorism. Roya Saberi Negad, a Facebook user with British and Iranian dual nationality, has been detained in Tehran's notorious Evin prison since October 2013, where she is serving a five-year sentence for criticizing the Iranian regime on Facebook.

Tania Quintero and her son, Ivan García Quintero embody journalistic resistance and illustrate the difficulties of free speech in Cuba. She is now a political refugee in Switzerland while he has stayed behind and continues to write blog posts about censorship and the fight for independent journalism.

Former war reporter Leonardo Sakamoto keeps a blog about human rights in Brazil and the fight against modern-day slavery. He has often been defamed and threatened and was the target of major smear campaign in April 2016. Created in the space of a day when Burundi's political crisis erupted in May 2015, SOS Média Burundi consists of a news website and a Facebook page where journalists posts news reports anonymously. It is come to be the main source of information about the crisis.

Now partnered with TV5 Monde, RSF's annual Press Freedom Prize has been drawing attention to the importance of freedom of information since 1992 by honouring journalists and media outlets that have made a noteworthy contribution to the defence or promotion of this fundamental freedom. Each award comes with 2,500 euros in prize money.

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