

Baghdad Dismisses Free Speech Criticism

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Rights groups say government not doing enough to protect freedom of expression and assembly.

The Iraqi government has condemned allegations by international human rights organisations that freedom of expression is as bad or worse than before, and that heavy-handed policing is curtailing the right to public assembly.

In its annual report for 2012, the New York-based group Human Rights Watch said conditions in Iraq "remained extremely poor, especially for journalists and activists". In its latest Press Freedom Index, meanwhile, the media advocacy group Reporters Without Borders ranked Iraq 152nd out of 179 countries, down from its previous position at 130.

Amnesty International, too, has accused the Iraqi government of failing to protect the media.

Baghdad has dismissed such accusations as inaccurate and unfair.

"Such reports are not true; they are biased," Ali al-Mosawi, a media advisor to the Iraqi government, said.

Mosawi argued that anti-government voices were constantly being heard in the media.

"They show up on satellite channels and TV stations, and they not only criticise the government, they slam it," he said. "Protesters hold demonstrations every week. Iraqis now enjoy more freedom of assembly than at any other time."

Iraq's minister for human rights, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, also rebuffed the accusations, telling reporters that reports should be based on "accurate sources".

"Iraqi people enjoy freedom more than any other Arab country," he continued. "We have excessive, not restricted freedom, and this results in chaos."

Reporters Without Borders said that after improving for several years, Iraq's press freedom ranking had fallen back to its 2008 position due to an increase in the murders of journalists.

"Hadi al-Mahdi's murder on 8 September marked a clear turning point," the group's report said.

Mahdi, a popular radio journalist often critical of government corruption and social inequality, was shot dead by an unknown assailant on September 8 at his home in Baghdad.

The Iraqi government said at the time that the murder had a criminal motive and was not connected to Mahdi's work as a journalist.

Although the Iraqi media has flourished since the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein nine years ago, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists says that "in 2011 Iraq remained one of the most dangerous countries in the world to work as a journalist; armed groups and unknown assailants killed at least five journalists and one media worker".

Other incidents last year included the February 20 attack on the private Nalia radio and television station in the Kurdish region, when dozens of masked men killed a security guard and set fire to the building.

On February 23, Iraqi security forces raided the office of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, a press freedom group in Baghdad, confiscating computers and other equipment and leaving the office in disarray.

Despite a new media law approved last year which was intended to protect media workers and compensate them for injuries sustained while working, critics maintain this has not done enough to ensure proper protection for journalists.

The Human Rights Watch report also accused both the Iraqi federal government and the regional authorities in Kurdistan of suppressing freedom of assembly.

When Iraqis demonstrated in the streets to demand better services, "security forces and gangs responded with violence and threats", it said.

Protests took place in Iraq in February 2011, at the same time as demonstrations swept through the Arab world. Unlike protesters in other countries who called on their national leaders to step down, Iraqis mostly called for better public services and an end to corruption.

Nevertheless, during nationwide demonstrations on February 25 last year, for example, security forces killed at least 12 protesters across the country and injured more than 100, according to Human Rights Watch.

In a previous IWPR report, protesters related how they had been intimidated and beaten. (See **New Union Aims to Protect Iraqi Bloggers.**)

Hayder Hamzoz, a well-known Iraqi blogger, told IWPR that he was beaten twice last year while attending protests in Baghdad's Tahrir square.

Hamzoz said he was live-tweeting details of attacks by security forces on participants in a demonstration in April when several men attacked and beat him severely before stealing the mobile phone he was using.

He was beaten again at a rally in June, and the assailants also tried to take his phone but were stopped by other demonstrators.

Government officials denied the authorities had cracked down on protesters, arguing that the security forces had in fact been deployed to protect the expression of dissent.

"Protestors attending the demonstration at Tahrir square every week, and the government sends its forces there every week in order to protect those protests," Mosawi said. "No journalists have been detained by the government."

Advocates of increased media freedom welcomed the reports released by international organisations, saying that they brought violations to the public's attention so that they could be addressed properly.

"We wish the government would react differently to the reports - for example by saying it would consider them and work to avoid the violations they cite," Hadi Jalo Marei, head of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, said. "This kind of criticism warns us of our mistakes and helps us avoid them as we build a new Iraq."

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