

Syria Cracks Down on Bloggers

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Victims include 19-year-old as regime resists free debate. By an IWPR-trained reporter

She was supposed to be hanging out with her classmates or preparing for school exams. Instead, Tal al-Mallohi, 19, has been imprisoned because her bold poems offended the Syrian authorities, her supporters say.

She wrote a [blog](#), which featured pieces about the duty of oppressed citizens to reject the life of subjugation and fight for their rights or about the Palestinians' right to return to their homeland, but her last posting was last September.

In December, security officials summoned Tal to question her about a piece she had written. A few days later, they came to her parents' house and confiscated her personal computer, according to Syrian human rights groups.

Since then, Mallohi has been held incommunicado and a [Facebook group](#) demanding her release has gathered more than 650 members.

In recent years, the tight control imposed by the Syrian regime on the mainstream media has encouraged many young people to break the silence over sensitive social and political issues and create blogs that discuss more freely issues like corruption and human rights.

But although the blogosphere has pried open a window of free expression for many young commentators, the government's ongoing blocking of websites and intimidation of bloggers have made it difficult for this medium to thrive.

"Blogging offers an opportunity and a platform for people to express themselves," said Abdul-Salam Ismail, a 32-year-old who a year ago started a [blog called Matches](#), where he regularly writes critically about economic policies and politics in Syria.

By reflecting ordinary people's real opinions on public matters, blogs call into question the news presented by the state-run media and other institutions that claim to represent the general public, he added.

In one of his blog entries, Ismail slammed security officials for requiring that internet cafe owners monitor the identity of their clients. In another, he urged Arab people to rise up against their leaders.

But for Ismail, blogs will only make a difference in an environment that is conducive to change, which is not the case in Syria. Otherwise, "blogs are an out-of-tune melody", he said.

Since President Bashar al-Assad succeeded his late father in 2000, the country has witnessed significant economic and social developments. However, many critics of the ruling Baath party's absolute power say that the long-awaited pro-democracy reforms have not yet materialised and that freedom of expression is still highly constrained in Syria.

Syrian bloggers write from both inside and outside the country. Some use their real names while others use pseudonyms for fear of going to jail. Readership remains relatively limited inside the country since internet use is not yet widespread. According to the International Telecommunication Union, a United Nations agency, the internet penetration rate in Syria as of 2008 was 16.8 per cent.

The Syrian authorities have a recent history of prosecuting bloggers for their writings, which may deter many.

In September 2009, Karim Arbaji was sentenced to three years in prison for "publishing mendacious information liable to weaken the nation's morale", a charge commonly used against dissidents.

Arbaji ran an online forum called Akhawia, where internet users discussed Syrian current affairs.

In March, pro-democracy activist Habib Saleh also received a three-year sentence for criticising the government in writings on the internet.

In previous years, a number of others were detained for posting critical material online. International media watchdog Reporters Without Borders said in a 2009 report that at least four cyber-activists were

behind bars in Syria and declared the country to be one of the world's 12 worst "Internet Enemies".

More than 200 websites are believed to be blocked by the authorities in Syria including blogging vehicle Blogspot and Facebook, though some users have found ways to circumvent such restrictions.

"The detention of bloggers shows that they [security officials] are afraid of them," said a 25 year-old Syrian who writes a blog from abroad.

"Despite all the difficulties they face, bloggers continue writing and this is an amazing thing."

The blogger, who preferred not to be named, said that he had not run into trouble with the authorities yet, but he feared access to his blog would be blocked in the future or members of his family in Syria would be harassed.

Under the banner "Freedom for the Voice of Conscience", the young blogger comments about court rulings against Syrian opposition leaders, so-called honour crimes that still exist in rural areas of Syria and the right for Syrian women married to foreigners to grant their nationality to their children.

Despite the pressure they face, many bloggers believe that the online world is the only opportunity for them to promote a dialogue about politics and society - something that's missing in other public arenas in Syria today.

"The most important role of blogs is that they instigated the culture of dialogue ... we miss that in our society," the blogger said.

Yassin Haj Saleh, another blogger and writer who has been arrested several times for his pro-democracy position, shares this view.

He said that blogging was "an important communication tool" that allowed interaction among people who are otherwise banned from participating in public discussions and comment on taboo issues related to sectarianism, politics and religion.

In one of his recent blog posts, Saleh, who is banned by the authorities from leaving the country, urged ordinary people to overcome their fear of the security apparatus and express their "opinions and anger".

Other bloggers choose self-censorship to stay out of trouble.

"I have put some limits on the topics I write about and the language I use," said Wael Alwani, a 24-year-old who started a blog a year ago on technology, social and political issues.

"I have to be aware of the red lines and not cross them."

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Topic: Arab Spring

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