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Repressive governments use sophisticated digital censorship and surveillance alongside more traditional methods to silence independent media. ***A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists.***

Eritrea is the world's most censored country, according to a list compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists. The list is based on CPJ's research into the use of tactics ranging from imprisonment and repressive laws to surveillance of journalists and restrictions on internet and social media access.

Under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to seek and receive news and express opinions. These 10 countries flout the international standard by banning or severely restricting independent media and intimidating journalists into silence with imprisonment, digital and physical surveillance, and other forms of harassment. Self-censorship is pervasive.

In the top three countries--Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan--the media serves as a mouthpiece of the state, and any independent journalism is conducted from exile. The few foreign journalists permitted to enter are closely monitored.

Other countries on the list use a combination of blunt tactics like harassment and arbitrary detention as well as sophisticated surveillance and targeted hacking to silence the independent press. Saudi Arabia, China, Vietnam, and Iran are especially adept at practicing these two brands of censorship: jailing and harassing journalists and their families, while also engaging in digital monitoring and censorship of the internet and social media.

The list addresses only those countries where the government tightly controls the media. The conditions for journalists and press freedom in states such as Syria, Yemen, and Somalia are also extremely difficult, but not necessarily attributable solely to government censorship. Rather, factors like violent conflict, insufficient infrastructure, and the role of non-state actors create conditions that are dangerous for the press.

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1. Eritrea

Leadership: President Isaias Afewerki, in power since 1993.

How censorship works: The government shut down all independent media in 2001. Eritrea is the worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa, with at least 16 journalists behind bars as of December 1, 2018; most have been imprisoned since the 2001 crackdown, and none received a trial. According to freedom of expression group Article 19, the 1996 press law includes a requirement that the media must promote "national objectives." The state retains a legal monopoly of broadcast media, and journalists for the state media toe the government's editorial line for fear of retaliation. Alternative sources of information such as the internet or satellite broadcasts of radio stations in exile are restricted through occasional signal jams and by the poor quality of the government-controlled internet, according to DW Akademie. Internet penetration is extremely low, at just over 1% of the population, according to the U.N. International Telecommunication Union. Users are forced to visit internet cafes, where they are easily monitored. A March 2019 report by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa suggests that the authoritarian state is so "brutal or commanding" as to "render ordering overt internet disruptions unnecessary." However, on May 15, 2019, the BBC reported a social media shutdown in Eritrea, ahead of the country's Independence Day celebrations. With the opening of the border with Ethiopia in mid-2018, some foreign journalists received special accreditation to visit Eritrea, according to *The Economist*, but access was tightly controlled.

Lowlight: As many as seven journalists may have perished in custody, according to reports that CPJ has not been able to confirm due to the climate of fear and tight state control. The government has refused all requests to provide concrete information on the fate of imprisoned journalists. In June 2019, more than 100 leading African journalists, scholars, and rights activists wrote an open letter to Afewerki, asking to visit long-imprisoned journalists and

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activists; this request was soundly rejected, and deemed "inappropriate" by Eritrea's Ministry of Information.

Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed during a ceremony marking the reopening of the Eritrean Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on July 16, 2018. A recent thawing of relations between the two countries did not lead to improved conditions for the media in Eritrea. (Reuters/Tiksa Negeri)

2. North Korea

Leadership: Kim Jong Un, who took over after his father, Kim Jong Il, died in 2011.

How censorship works: Article 67 of the country's constitution calls for freedom of the press, but nearly all the content of North Korea's newspapers, periodicals, and broadcasters comes from the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), which focuses on the political leadership's statements and activities. KCNA, which is highly restrictive in its coverage of foreign news, reported extensively on the brief visit by U.S. President Donald Trump to North Korea in June 2019, and praised it as an "amazing event," the BBC reported. The Associated Press and Agence France-Presse have small bureaus, but international correspondents have been denied entry, detained, and expelled. Access to the global internet is restricted to the political elite, but some schools and state institutions have access to a tightly controlled intranet called Kwangmyong. Bootlegged foreign TV and radio signals and smuggled foreign DVDs are the main sources of independent information for the majority of North Koreans, according to a report by InterMedia. Since Kim Jong Un took power, authorities have stepped up the use of radio signal blockers and advanced radio detection equipment to prevent people from sharing information, according to *The Diplomat*. As of March 2019, at least four million North Koreans subscribe to Koryolink, North Korea's main mobile network, according to South Korean

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daily *The Hankyoreh*, which cited Statistics Korea; however, subscribers are not able to access content outside North Korea.

Lowlight: In September 2017, a North Korean court sentenced two South Korean journalists and their publishers to death in absentia for "insulting the dignity of the country." Son Hyo-rim of *Dong-A Ilbo* and Yang Ji-ho of *The Chosun Ilbo* interviewed the authors of "North Korea Confidential," a 2015 book detailing ordinary lives in North Korea, and reviewed the book for their newspapers.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during a visit in Beijing, China, in a photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency on January 10, 2019. North Korea continues to be one of the most repressive countries in the world for journalists. (KCNA via Reuters)

3. Turkmenistan

Leadership: President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, in power since 2006.

How censorship works: Berdymukhamedov enjoys absolute control over all spheres of life in Turkmenistan, including the media, using it to promote his cult of personality. His regime suppresses independent voices by detaining and jailing journalists and, according to U.S.-Congress funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, forcing others to flee the country. All media outlets are owned or tightly controlled by the government. A handful of independent Turkmenistan-focused media outlets, such as *Khronika Turkmenistana* (Chronicles of Turkmenistan), operate in exile, and anyone who attempts to access the website can be questioned by the authorities, *OpenDemocracy* reported. Correspondents for RFE/RL's Turkmen service work under pseudonyms and have been imprisoned, attacked, and banned from traveling. Only around 21% of the country's population had access to the internet, according to the U.N. International Telecommunication Union. The regime blocks independent online

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publications and bans the use of VPNs and other anonymizing tools, according to IREX's 2017 Media Sustainability Index. Access for foreign media is rare; ahead of the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, authorities revoked the accreditation of several British journalists, according to the *Guardian*. RFE/RL reported in February 2019 that authorities "have actively pursued Western surveillance technology."

Lowlight: In March 2019, freelance journalist Soltan Achilova, 69, who contributes to *Khronika Turkmenistana* and who has previously contributed to RFE/RL's Turkmen service, was barred from boarding an international flight. Achilova, who chronicles daily life in Turkmenistan, has previously been detained by police, physically assaulted, and threatened due to her journalism.

Independent freelance journalist Soltan Achilova, as seen in November 2017 in her house in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, has been detained, physically assaulted, and threatened due to her work. (CPJ via Khronika Turkmenistana)

4. Saudi Arabia

Leadership: King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, in power since 2015. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in power since 2017.

How censorship works: Under Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's already-repressive environment for the press has suffered sharp deterioration. Anti-terror and cybercrime laws and specialized courts give authorities free rein to imprison journalists and bloggers who stray from the pro-government narrative; 16 journalists were behind bars as of December 1, 2018. Saudi authorities detained at least nine additional journalists in the first half of 2019 alone. At least four of the journalists detained under bin Salman's crackdown have been abused and tortured in Saudi prisons, according to medical assessments prepared for King Salman and leaked to *The*

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Guardian newspaper. Under a 2011 regulation, websites, blogs, and anyone posting news or commentary online must have a license from the Ministry of Culture and Information. Authorities have expanded control over digital content, where the use of cybersurveillance is ubiquitous, according to *The Washington Post*. According to reports in *The New York Times* and other sources, the authorities utilize surveillance technology and troll and bot armies to suppress coverage and discussion of sensitive topics, including the war in Yemen, and to allegedly monitor dissident Saudi journalists. Saudi authorities block websites they deem objectionable, as well as access to VPN providers that would bypass blocks, according to Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* report. Foreign correspondents do report from Saudi Arabia, but authorities are capricious in granting entry and international reporters often face restrictions on their movements, according to the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Lowlight: In October 2018, Saudi agents--including those connected to bin Salman--brutally murdered *Washington Post* columnist and government critic Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, after luring him there to obtain paperwork. A June 2019 UN report called the murder a "premeditated execution" for which the Saudi government "is responsible," and called for an investigation into bin Salman's role.

People holding pictures of slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi attend a symbolic funeral prayer for Khashoggi at the courtyard of Fatih mosque in Istanbul, Turkey, on November 16, 2018. Khashoggi's murder is one of the most extreme examples of the Saudi regime's recent crackdown on the independent press. (Reuters/Huseyin Aldemir)

5. China

Leadership: President Xi Jinping, in office since 2013.

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How censorship works: China has the world's most extensive and sophisticated censorship apparatus. For nearly two decades, the country has been among the world's top jailers of journalists, with at least 47 behind bars as of December 1, 2018. Both privately and state-owned news outlets are under the authorities' supervision, and those who fail to follow the Chinese Communist Party's directives are suspended or otherwise punished, according to news reports. Since 2017, no website or social media account is allowed to provide news service on the internet without the Cyberspace Administration of China's permission. Internet users are blocked from foreign search engines, news websites, and social media platforms by the Great Firewall. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in March 2018 announced new regulations that ban unauthorized VPNs, which internet users rely on to circumvent the firewall. Authorities monitor domestic social media networks, using surveillance programs and trained censor professionals. Foreign social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are banned; they are accessible via VPNs, but censorship efforts have extended to knocking on doors to order people to delete their tweets, according to *The Washington Post*. International journalists working in China face digital and human surveillance, with visas delayed or denied. In August 2018, the Hong Kong Journalists Association said press freedom in the territory had deteriorated under the "one country" policy, with the media practicing more self-censorship without laws to safeguard freedom of information.

Lowlight: In the northwest Xinjiang region, where the authorities have detained up to three million Uighur and Turkic Muslims in so-called reeducation camps, surveillance and censorship are widespread. Journalists in the region risk imprisonment for everyday reporting, on charges such as being a "two-faced" party official. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China in January 2019 said many members who travel to the region are followed and surveilled.

Visitors take pictures under blooming cherry blossoms near a high-resolution artificial-intelligence camera at Yuyuantan Park in Beijing, China, on March 19, 2019. China has a vast and sophisticated censorship apparatus that is used to monitor journalists as well as ordinary citizens. (Reuters/Stringer)

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6. Vietnam

Leadership: President and Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, in power since 2018.

How censorship works: The Communist Party-led government owns and controls all print and broadcast media in Vietnam. A raft of repressive laws and decrees sharply curtails any media criticism of the one-party government, its policies, and its performance. The 2016 Press Law states that the press must serve as the voice of the party, party organizations, and state agencies. Censorship is enforced through government directives to newspaper, radio, and TV editors, commanding which topics are to be highlighted and omitted. There are no independent, non-state online news outlets allowed to be based in Vietnam apart from the Catholic church-run *Redemptorist News* and foreign news bureaus whose reporters are tightly surveilled and movements restricted. Foreign journalists who travel on media visas are required to hire a government minder who follows them. A new cybersecurity law came into effect on January 1, 2019, giving authorities sweeping powers to censor online content, including provisions that require technology companies to disclose user data and take down content viewed as objectionable by authorities, according to Reuters. The law builds on Decree 72, a 2013 order that gave the state broad authority to censor blogs and social media; internet service providers that disseminate banned content face fines or closure, according to the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Censored topics include human rights and the activities of political dissidents. Censorship is enforced through filtering and surveillance, including through a military-run, 10,000-strong cyber warfare unit known as "Force 47" tasked with tackling "wrong views," according to the *Financial Times*. Independent journalists and bloggers who report critically on sensitive issues face harassment or detention on anti-state charges; at least 11 were behind bars as of December 1, 2018.

Lowlight: Radio Free Asia blogger Truong Duy Nhat, known for his critical exposés on the Communist Party, went missing in Thailand in January 2019 amid widespread speculation he was abducted by Vietnamese agents. He re-emerged in March in Hanoi's T-16 prison, where he was being held without charge, according to news reports.

Blogger Truong Duy Nhat stands trial in Da Nang, Vietnam, on March 4, 2014. In January 2019, he disappeared in Thailand, and in March was reported to be detained in Hanoi's T-16 detention center. (Vietnam News Agency via AFP)

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7. Iran

Leadership: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in power since 1989. President Hassan Rouhani, in office since 2013.

How censorship works: Iran's government jails journalists, blocks websites, and maintains a climate of fear with harassment and surveillance, including of journalists' families. Domestic media must adhere to tight government controls. All journalists working in Iran must receive official accreditation; those permissions are regularly suspended or revoked. Foreign bureaus are permitted but work under intense scrutiny; correspondents from international outlets have had their permission to work suspended for periods of time, and in some cases permanently. Authorities arrest and impose harsh prison sentences on journalists who cover topics deemed sensitive, including local corruption and protests. The government suppresses online expression by spying on domestic and international journalists, jamming satellite television broadcasts, and blocking millions of websites and key social media platforms, according to the Center for Human Rights in Iran and U.S. Congress-funded Radio Farda. When nationwide anti-government protests took place in late 2017 and early 2018, authorities throttled and shut down the internet and mobile networks, according to *Newsweek*. They banned circumvention tools and used hacking and trolling campaigns targeted at domestic and international reporters, Radio Farda reported. The National Cyberspace Council has banned Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube--and the messaging apps Telegram and WhatsApp--but these are accessible via VPNs, according to Bloomberg.

Lowlight: In January 2019, Iran's judiciary sentenced Yashar Soltani to five years in prison on anti-state charges after he published a series of articles that unveiled alleged corruption in Tehran land deals. Soltani worked for *Memari News*, the now-defunct independent website focusing exclusively on architecture and urban affairs.

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A man uses his cell phone, with a photo of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in Tehran, Iran, on October 13, 2017. The government in recent years has stepped up internet and digital censorship, including bans on social media sites and messaging apps. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

8. Equatorial Guinea

Leadership: President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, in power since 1979; Africa's longest-ruling head of state.

How censorship works: The government maintains a tight grip on how and what journalists report in Equatorial Guinea. All broadcast media are government owned, except for RTV-Asonga, a network owned by the president's son, Teodoro Nguema Obiang, who is also the country's vice president. Local and international broadcasters have been banned from covering certain subjects deemed threatening to the image of the country or those close to the president. While privately owned newspapers do exist, journalists work under threat of prosecution for coverage deemed critical of the president, his family, or the government in general, and thus frequently self-censor, according to a June 2019 report by Civicus. Websites of foreign news outlets and the political opposition are among those regularly blocked, according to an October 2018 civil society submission to the U.N. Universal Periodic Review. The 1997 Press. Printing and Audiovisual Law restricts journalistic activity, including allowing for official prepublication censorship, and defamation and libel remain criminal offenses under the penal code, according to Civicus and Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* report. In November 2017, the internet was shut down on the day of voting for parliamentary and municipal elections, and Facebook was blocked for about three weeks prior to the vote, according to news reports and civil society group EG Justice.

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Lowlight: In September 2017, cartoonist Ramón Nsé Esono Ebalé--who had been living in exile--was arrested by Equatorial Guinean authorities while in the country to renew his passport; he was interrogated about his drawings and blog that featured critical commentary on the president, and imprisoned for six months on false charges of money laundering and counterfeiting. After his release in March 2018, the authorities refused to renew his passport for several months, preventing him from returning home to his wife and child in El Salvador.

Equatorial Guinean cartoonist Ramón Nsé Esono Ebalé in court in Malabo on February 27, 2018. Ebalé, whose drawings and blog feature commentary critical of the president and the government, was released in March 2018 after being imprisoned for six months on false charges of money laundering and counterfeiting. (AFP/Samuel Obiang)

9. Belarus

Leadership: President Alexander Lukashenko, in power since 1994; Europe's longest-ruling head of state.

How censorship works: Authorities in Belarus exercise almost absolute control over the media; and the few independent journalists and bloggers face harassment and detentions. The state systematically targets influential media outlets and individuals, often in very public ways, arresting journalists, raiding newsrooms, and initiating criminal probes for reporting. In recent years, the government blocked independent news websites including *Charter 97*, founded by now-exiled journalist Natalya Radina. As the government squeezes independent news outlets, more Belarusians rely on social networks. In recent legislative moves to tighten its grip on digital media, the government in 2018 approved a bill on "fake news" and adopted amendments to the Law on Mass Media that tightened control over news websites and social media. The government has the authority to oversee internet service providers (ISPs), set standards for

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information security, conduct digital surveillance of citizens, and manage Belarus' top-level domains, according to Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* report.

Lowlight: In March 2019, Maryna Zolatava, editor-in-chief of independent news outlet *Tut.by*, was found guilty of accessing a state-run news site with someone else's log-in information and fined 7,650 Belarusian rubles ($3,600).

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is seen on TV screens inside a shop during a briefing in Minsk, Belarus, on February 3, 2017. The government recently tightened its control over news websites and social media. (AP Photo/Sergei Grits)

10. Cuba

Leadership: President Miguel Díaz-Canel, who succeeded Raúl Castro in 2018.

How censorship works: Despite some improvements in recent years--including the expansion of mobile internet and Wi-Fi access--Cuba still has the most restricted climate for the press in the Americas. Print and broadcast media are wholly controlled by the one-party Communist state and, by law, must be "in accordance with the goals of the socialist society." In a missed opportunity, a referendum on constitutional changes, approved in February 2019, did not include any loosening of media restrictions. Cuba rolled out home internet access in 2017 and mobile data plans in 2018, but the services are prohibitively expensive for most Cubans, with 4 gigabytes of data costing around $30, the equivalent of the average state monthly salary in 2017. Although the internet has opened some space for critical reporting, the state-owned service provider, ETECSA, is ordered to block objectionable content, and restricts access to some critical blogs and news platforms, according to a report by the Open Observatory of Network Interference, which collects data on network tampering. Some independent journalists and bloggers use websites that are hosted overseas. The government targets critical journalists

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through harassment, physical and online surveillance, short-term detentions, home raids, and equipment seizures. Natural disaster coverage is one flashpoint: authorities detained multiple journalists reporting on the aftermath of hurricanes in October 2016 and September 2017. Visas for international journalists are granted selectively by officials, according to Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* report.

Lowlight: In April 2019, police agents detained Roberto Jesús Quiñones, a contributor to the news website *CubaNet*, outside the Guantánamo Municipal Tribunal where he was covering a trial, and beat him while he was being transported to the Guantánamo police station. Quiñones had been harassed by Cuban authorities in the past, is barred from leaving the country, and has been detained several times, according to *CubaNet*.

A man sits in front of a poster of Cuba's late president, Fidel Castro, at the Cuban State Television and Radio headquarters in Havana, Cuba, on March 14, 2017. Cuba has the most restricted climate for the press in the Americas. (AP Photo/Desmond Boylan)

Methodology: The 10 Most Censored Countries list assesses direct and indirect government censorship based on CPJ research, as well as the expertise of the organization's staff. Countries are evaluated based on a series of benchmarks, including:

- Absence of and/or restrictions on privately owned or independent media
- Criminal defamation laws; criminal restrictions on the dissemination of false news
- Blocking of websites
- Jamming of foreign broadcasts
- Blocking of foreign correspondents
- Surveillance of journalists by authorities
- Restrictions on journalists' movements
- License requirements to conduct journalism
- Restrictions on electronic recording and dissemination
- Targeted hacking or trolling campaigns

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