

Al-Jazeera journalists jailed for seven years in Egypt



Al-Jazeera journalists Peter Greste, Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed listen to the ruling in Cairo as they are jailed today

Tuesday 24 June 2014 02.31 AEST

The [jailing of three al-Jazeera journalists in Egypt](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/23/al-jazeera-journalists-jailed-seven-years-egypt) marks a disturbing new stage in the erosion of freedom of expression rights worldwide. In 2013 [more than 200 journalists were jailed](https://www.cpj.org/imprisoned/2013.php) worldwide for doing their job – close to recorded highs.

A free press is one of the cornerstones of a free society. And it needs to be free in practice, not just in theory. This means not just enshrining guarantees of press freedom – and freedom of expression more generally – in the legal system, but also making sure that other laws such as those ostensibly created to protect citizens from, say, terrorists should not be used as a means to stifle the press.

In countries including [Egypt](http://www.theguardian.com/world/egypt), Turkey and Russia, laws brought in to protect national security are being used to prevent journalists from investigating and reporting objectively. They are being used against citizens who criticise their governments. The effect of these laws, and of rulings such as that made today by the Egyptian court, is to create a climate of fear that means other journalists, bloggers, campaigners and activists are afraid to speak out.

And rather than censoring the media directly, governments can effectively control coverage by getting individuals to censor themselves. As [Andrei Soldatov, a Russian blogger, told Index on Censorship](http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/06/voices-frontlines-censorship-andrei-soldatov/) last week: "Very few people [have been] sent to jail for posting critical things online, and relatively few new media were put under direct government pressure." But freedom of expression on the internet in Russia has been hugely affected: users have become cautious in their comments, and internet companies, even when invited to talk to Vladimir Putin, are so frightened that they failed to raise the issue of regulation.

"The beauty of the Russian approach," Soldatov said, "is that it doesn't need to be technically sophisticated to be efficient. It also doesn't need mass repression against journalists or activists. So why is that? Basically, the Russian approach is all about instigating self-censorship." It is a similar story in countries such as Azerbaijan, which have used smear tactics against investigative journalists in an effort to discredit them and frighten them off their reports, or claim they believe in free speech while arresting prominent free speech campaigners on spurious charges such as drug possession.

An anti-protest law passed in Egypt at the end of last year gives security forces the right to break up any gathering held without government authorisation, and allows the use of lethal force against demonstrators deemed a threat to public order.

Those al-Jazeera journalists work for a well-resourced international organisation, with a network of vocal supporters. Not all of those under threat of censorship have such a network, and it is crucial that the international community pays attention to these individuals too: the bloggers still under arrest in Ethiopia for trying to report events in the country, the Turkish journalists dismissed from their papers for failing to toe their owners' official lines, and the citizen journalists harassed by Brazilian police for [reporting anti-government protests](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/29/brazil-ninja-reporters-stories-streets).

Freedom to speak, write or even tell your friends what is happening is vitally important. Without information people will never learn about disasters and how to avoid them in future. They will never know that there is an epidemic and to take precautions. People must feel free and safe to share information and opinions. Without freedom of expression people will never be able to trust their governments.