

The Algerian Press: On the Brink

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Brief Analysis

After the outbreak of the so-called “oil and sugar” protest that began in Algeria concurrently with the Arab Spring, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was quick to announce that he would promote far-reaching political reforms in an attempt to assuage public pressure. However, the state of journalism in the country has not improved much since, as reforms did not eliminate harsh restrictions on freedoms of the press, and financial burdens have forced several media outlets to close down. Thus, unless significant changes are introduced, the promises of 2011 will have amounted to nothing.

Back in 2011, Bouteflika responded to protesters’ demands by introducing new laws, along with changes to the constitution and amendments to basic laws. Among the new laws enacted was a new “organic” media law that, when passed in January 2012, provoked widespread discussion over whether authorities intended to expand the freedom of the press—a question which Algerian journalists and others continue to debate. In theory, the purpose of the law was to facilitate the formation of regulatory bodies, such as the Audiovisual Regulatory Authority, aimed at improving journalists’ professional and social circumstances.

Two years after the new media law was instituted, authorities introduced a supplementary law intended to end the state’s monopoly on audiovisual media by allowing the establishment of private television channels. Yet this law also generated controversy given its inclusion of clauses that promote oppressive conditions endangering and hindering the liberalization of the media.

Nonetheless, many welcomed the law, some even rushing to set up satellite channels. What is notable, however, is that all of the channels that emerged on the media scene were foreign networks whose licenses had been issued by foreign countries. The reason for this strange state of affairs was the government’s delay in granting domestic licenses for satellite channels. As a result, sixty satellite channels began broadcasting during a short period of time in response to the absence of a regulatory infrastructure.

Consequentially, in May 2016, Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sallal announced that fifty channels would be shut down on the pretext that they did not have licenses to operate in Algeria. Sallal argued that, as a matter of fact, only five channel had the correct license and asked the Minister of Information to introduce regulations defining the rights and responsibilities of new channels.

Nevertheless, in practice, obtaining a broadcasting license in Algeria is still impossible: although the government

had announced that it would begin examining applications in October 2017, not a single license has been granted to date, and all but five satellite channels are still operating illegally.

Due to an absence of clear regulation, the media market is dominated by chaos. To make matters worse, the Audiovisual Regulatory Authority has proved unable to carry out its mandate of regulating channels effectively. Algerians well remember last year's humiliation of the prominent novelist Rachid Boudjedra as he was filmed by a hidden camera while being asked unprecedented and inappropriate questions about his religious and intellectual inclinations. This episode was widely condemned, and a group of intellectuals—including President Bouteflika's brother—organized a protest denouncing the incident. However, the industry still lacks clear guidelines that would help avoid these types of issues.

The problems plaguing Algerian press extend beyond television channels. Indeed, the state of written journalism can be described as exceedingly poor. Due to low wages and disgraceful professional circumstances, journalists' prospects remain limited at best. In addition, many news outlets have faced financial crises that have forced them to drastically scale back their operations or even shut down. Only last August, after a twenty-two year run, the management of the eminent French-language newspaper *La Tribune* decided to shut down and lay off all of its employees because of financial troubles resulting from high taxes, printing press debts, and shrinking advertising revenues.

Although the fate of the newspaper sent shockwaves through Algerian media circles, it was, in fact, predictable. The media sector is one of many Algerian markets struggling due to the country's larger austerity crisis and declining incomes brought about by the 2014 international plummet of oil prices. Following the crisis, former Minister of Communications Hamid Grine announced that the volume of media advertising issued by government institutions will be reduced by 65 percent in 2015 and 2016. As a result of the initial 2016 cuts alone, six newspapers were forced out of business, and consequentially even more journalists have lost their jobs. Since then, the situation has continued to escalate, as the demise of newspapers such as *La Tribune* has had a negative impact on the quality and availability of written media in Algeria.

In light of the aforementioned developments, it is clear that the government's early pledges were merely lip service intended to lull the public. In order to keep Algeria's media functioning, the government must expedite the adoption of a law enshrining journalistic rights and responsibilities. Prompt action is required to set up the print journalism regulatory authority promised in 2012, whose members should be elected by journalists themselves rather than by government appointment.

The government must also act quickly to set up a supreme council overseeing journalistic conduct and ethics in order to prevent defective journalistic practices. With regard to the audiovisual sector, authorities must promptly issue relevant regulations, ensure the effective operation of the Audiovisual Regulatory Authority, and license private channels in accordance with already existing regulations.

However, one of the most crucial steps required to preserve and promote Algerian media would be a review of the advertising law. Given that the state can no longer support journalism through advertising revenue, the state's monopoly and dominance over advertising must come to an end.

Instead, the state must allow newspapers and media institutions to operate in a free market system so that they can reap advertising revenues based on their reach and consumer appeal. Media institutions must also be required to contribute their share by paying their employees appropriate salaries and allocating a portion of revenues for training and performance improvement programs. Only by injecting revenue back into the media sector will Algerian journalism be shielded from further deterioration. ❖

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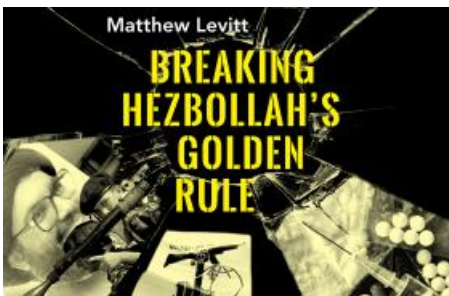
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